

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN:
THE CHURCH'S ATTEMPTS AT INNOVATION
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Our family recently received a post card in the mail inviting us to the ~~gr~~and opening+of a new church in the community. They promised a fun time for the whole family, a free barbeque dinner, and the day would be topped off with, and I quote, an ~~en~~joyable sermon.+ Knowing that this church had mailed this invitation to thousands of households in the surrounding area hoping to attract unchurched people, I wondered; since unbelievers are blinded to the truths of Scripture, are hostile to the things of God, and gravitate to what is in their own self-interest, what would an unbeliever find ~~en~~joyable+about this sermon?

In 1 John 2:19 the apostle John tells his readers that ~~they~~ went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they were of us they would have remained with us.+John is clearly drawing a distinction between two groups of people, ~~us~~+and ~~they~~+. The ~~us~~+group are obviously Christians since John is included among the ~~us~~+, and the ~~they~~+group are clearly non-Christians because the reason they separated from the ~~us~~+group is ~~that~~ it might be shown that *they* all are not of *us*+(2:19). But who exactly are the ~~they~~+group? Verse 18 tells us; ~~many~~ antichrists+, that is, those who say Jesus is not the Messiah (2:22). In other words, the ~~they~~+group was made up of people who were teaching that Jesus is someone and something other than He really is, and as a result were attracting people to themselves and their own version of Jesus, not to the Jesus of Scripture. What provided the ~~they~~+group with credibility was the fact they had originated from *within* the ~~us~~+group, the true Christians, not from *outside* the ~~us~~+group. They could claim a connection to the ~~us~~+group even though they had some serious deviations from the truth.

The greatest threats to the church are always from inside the church, not outside. This threat hides under a translucent veneer of Christianity so as to appear respectable, and because it professes to be Christian it considers itself a protected species and off limits to any criticism or biblical examination. Not only that; it gets results, it draws a crowd, so how could it be wrong. The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders, ~~I~~ know that after my departure savage wolves will *come in among you*, not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* men will arise, speaking perverse things, *to draw away the disciples after them*" (Ac 20:29, 30). Peter warned Christians, ~~But~~ false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers *among you*, who will *secretly introduce* destructive heresies+(2 Pt 2:1). In the context of Paul and Peter's day, these covert false teachers introduced a Jesus that condoned a life of immorality

and self-gratification and ignored the pursuit of holiness and purity of life as evidence of genuine conversion. They had turned grace into license (2 Pt 2:2; Jude 4).

It is a sad fact that perhaps the most ignored warnings in the New Testament are those pertaining to the reality of false teachers in the church (Ac 20:29, 30; 2 Cor 11:13-15; Ga 4:7; Eph 4:14; Col 2:8, 18; 2 Pt 2:1; 3:3; 1 Jn 2:18, 19, 26; 4:1; Jude 4). The sheer number of these warnings proves that this was no isolated concern. The apostle Paul was preoccupied with false teachers as was John and Peter. The Old Testament is equally leery of the pernicious effects of false teachers upon the people of God. But in our politically correct and post-modern relativistic culture to identify a teaching or teacher as false is to risk being labeled a negative teacher, a heresy hunter, behind the times, unimaginative, irrelevant, and causing division within the church. It also confronts people with the fact that there is such a thing as objective, propositional truth. All one has to do is walk into virtually any Christian bookstore and notice the best-sellers to realize that few Christians have been taught to discern truth from error.

A great deal of what passes for Christian literature today is nothing more than someone's subjective, personal experience. Someone claims to have received private, personal messages from God, or been shown things previously unrevealed in Scripture, or to have died, gone to heaven, and come back and want to tell us all about it, and then they write a book chronicling their personal experience and represent it as coming straight from the mouth of God. The author of one such popular book self-admittedly had no prior belief in God, so how could he have gone to heaven? The gullibility and lack of discernment is staggering. It used to be claims of extra-biblical revelation were confined to elements of the charismatic movement, but no more. The popular Christian author Beth Moore, whose teaching material is used in thousands of churches, claims to receive visions from God. James McDonald has stated that God still speaks to us in dreams and visions. The fact that such claims are flatly contradicted by Scripture doesn't seem to matter in the least. Ignored is the fact that this teaching seriously undermines the sufficiency of Scripture. But it goes deeper than that. Such claims of extra-biblical revelation go right to the core of man's original rebellion against God; they appeal to something very dark and sinister in the heart of man. Fallen man's natural inclination is to live a life independent and autonomous from God. Mankind chafes at living under the restrictions imposed by God, and like Adam and Eve wants to chart his own course. Sinful man has an irresistible fascination with claims of extra-biblical revelation because they appeal to our instinctive lust to be free from our absolute and unqualified dependence on God's word. Rather than being guided by God's commands and principles as taught in Scripture, people are encouraged and emboldened to trust in some sort of extra-biblical guidance and to look outside of Scripture for the answers to their problems. To be able to claim that one has received direct communication from

God is an intoxicating proposition. It doesn't seem to matter that God condemned the prophets of Israel for this same type of deceptive teaching.

The principles found in Jeremiah 23 should act as a grave warning against claiming that God has spoken when He has not. The source of these extra-biblical revelations is made clear in Jeremiah 23:16, *"Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord"* (cf. Jer. 14:14, 15). Such claims of private, subjective revelation and personal experiences, no matter how dramatic or unexplainable, are the product of someone's own imagination, not a new word from God. A true messenger of God speaks God's word, not their own subjective impressions. God makes this crystal clear in verse 22, *"But if they had stood in My council, then they would have announced My words to My people"*, and would have turned them back from their evil way and from the evil of their deeds. What could be clearer? These self-proclaimed heralds of extra-biblical revelation lack any sort of authority, do not stand in God's council, are deficient in their understanding of His true revelation, and have no sanctifying effect on His people.

Where do we go to hear a word from God? Scripture and only Scripture contains the word of God; not dreams; not private impressions; not personal experiences; not near-death experiences. God considers all such extra-biblical revelation as mere straw and worthless chaff: *"The prophet who has a dream may relate his dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth"*. What does *straw* have in common with grain (Jer 23:28)? Straw has no value, but grain feeds, nourishes, strengthens, and grows. God's word is grain, but someone's private subjective experience is as worthless as straw when it comes to providing any benefit to the body of Christ. God has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness in His word, either in direct command or in principles. What does it mean to speak God's word *in truth*? It means to speak only what God has spoken, to interpret His word correctly with no misrepresentation, and to explain its true meaning. Jeremiah gives the qualities of God's true word. It is like fire (23:29) in that it is cleansing, penetrating, purifying, and consumes evil, unlike someone's powerless subjective experiences. God's word is like a hammer that shatters a rock; it is full of power (cf. Hb 5:14). It does not lull someone into a false sense of security they are truly saved; it does not rationalize sin, encourage sin, or make people comfortable in their sin; it does not boost a person's self-esteem, rather it exposes us as the vile sinners we really are, crushes, and brings repentance. God's word convicts and converts; it does not pacify, entertain, or amuse.

Jeremiah was told by God, *"And if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman"* (Jer. 15:19). In other words, all false teaching contains an

element of truth; this is what makes it so dangerous and so convincing. It is the responsibility of God's spokesman to extract the precious from the worthless; to winnow the chaff from the grain; to discern truth from error. It was their failure to distinguish truth from error that was the cause of God's severe denunciation of Israel's spiritual leaders. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, *“For priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean”* her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, *“seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord God,’ when the Lord has not spoken”* (Ez. 22:26, 28). It is a very serious matter to claim that God has spoken when He has not. All such claims to extra-biblical revelation place a person in the category of a false prophet. In fact, anyone who professes to be a preacher of God's word and yet claims to have received extra-biblical revelation from God, or intentionally misrepresents or misuses Scripture, or fails to teach the truths of Scripture, simply proves they are not speaking on behalf of God.

Paul instructed Timothy to *“preach the word”* (2 Tm 4:2), not his own private and subjective experiences. Jesus came *“proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom”* (Mt 4:23). The Greek word translated *“preach, proclaim”* is the word *kerusso* and means *“to announce, to be a herald.”* Every king had a herald, and the primary responsibility of the herald was to deliver the message of the king *exactly* as it was given to him. If he added to the message, or embellished it, or failed to deliver the entire message he was a false and unfaithful herald. The message he proclaimed did not originate with himself, and he was not to express his own views. He was the official spokesman of his master, he was to adopt the mindset of his master, and he acted with the full authority of his master. This is precisely what Jesus did; *“My teaching is not mine, but His who sent Me”* (Jn 7:16; cf 3:32, 8:26, 15:15, 16:13, 17:8). Notice again God's denunciation of Israel's prophets who were *“saying, ‘Thus says the Lord God,’ when the Lord has not spoken”* (Ez. 22: 28). True preaching and true teaching explains and applies God's word, not a person's own opinions or subjective experiences. All claims of extra-biblical revelation and private messages from God are false. The canon of Scripture is closed. No further revelation from God is forthcoming.

Some may be inclined to think that all these accounts of subjective personal experience are just harmless ways of expressing one's deep devotion to God, or a well-meaning attempt to energize the Christian community. God thinks otherwise. Just listen to how God takes being misrepresented: *“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, ‘I had a dream. I had a dream!’”* Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the *“deception of their own heart, who intend to make people forget My name by their*

dreams which they relate to one another (Jer 23:25, 26)? In this passage God identifies the *source*, the *purpose*, and the *means* of extra-biblical revelation. The *source* is ~~the~~ the deception of their own heart; the *purpose* is ~~to~~ to make people forget My name; and the *means* is ~~by~~ by their dreams; i.e. their subjective personal experiences and impressions. Extra-biblical revelation draws people away from God's word, not lead them to God's word. Scripture is no longer the sole test of truth, but rather personal experience and human reason is given a voice in determining what is true. All heresy is the fruit of making man's reason the judge of God's revelation. Most people who make claims of hearing directly from God will deny that the messages they receive are equal in authority to Scripture. But on what basis does their disclaimer rest? If the message is from God how can it not be authoritative? And if it is not authoritative, what use is it? Usually when anyone questions the validity of someone's experience, and even refutes their experience with Scripture, they are accused of trying ~~to~~ to put God in a box and usually the person's experience will trump Scripture, thereby exposing the fact that at least the person himself believes that his experience is equally or more authoritative than Scripture. If God is still giving revelation today shouldn't we accept the Book of Mormon as genuine revelation from God? On what basis do Christians who claim to receive extra-biblical revelation reject the claims of Mormonism?

It is a great error to think that God still leads His saints, at least those that consider themselves to be more spiritually gifted, by new and direct revelation and impulses. It denies the *sufficiency* of Scripture and confuses the Holy Scriptures with man's imaginations, thus seriously depreciating the *authority* of Scripture by placing someone's subjective experience on a par with Scripture. This error will defend and support the errors of others, for it cannot deny the legitimacy of someone else's revelation without calling into question its own legitimacy. As long as a person believes he is being led by direct revelation, he is impervious to correction, no matter how unbiblical and bazaar it makes his beliefs and conduct. They confuse the motions of their own mind with divine revelation, and to hold both as equally authoritative is at the same time to seriously depreciate Scripture and unjustifiably exalt human imaginations.

There is so much confusion as to what it really means to be a Christian, how a person becomes a Christian, and what Christianity really offers to people. And this is tragic, because only true Christianity has the solution for all the world's problems. All the ideas and schemes of man have been tried and failed, and been tried again with the same miserable results. But when the world turns to the church it hears a confused message. And what makes this confusion so inexcusable is that we have God's clear message before us, and in a language we can understand. So why is there all this confusion? Because instead of teaching and preaching God's word people have imposed their own message on Scripture and substituted their own subjective ideas and impressions for

God's message. This has led to unprecedented biblical illiteracy and theological ignorance among those who profess to be Christians. The average Jehovah's Witness can turn the average Christian into a theological pretzel in about two minutes. But Jeremiah warned this would be the consequence when people depended on subjective experiences and extra-biblical revelation; *For you will no longer remember the oracle of the Lord, because every man's own word will become the oracle*, and you have perverted the words of the living God (Jer. 23:36). When the meaning of Scripture becomes a matter of someone's own personal opinion, and God's word is arrogantly perverted to make it conform to man's subjective impressions and personal desires, the inevitable result is widespread biblical illiteracy and theological ignorance. People cannot love a God they do not know, and the only way to know God is through His self-revelation in Scripture.

What does God make of people who claim to have been given extra-biblical revelation by God? What is God's assessment of all this literature that has flooded the Christian book market and claims to provide fresh insight into the counsel of God? Jeremiah continues, *Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams, declares the Lord, and related them, and led my people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit*, declares the Lord (Jer 23:32). Scripture is clear, everything that claims to be extra-biblical revelation from God has only one source . self-deception; and only one consequence . it leads people away from God, not to God. It is the invention of a powerful self-deception, it has no power to effect real change in a person's life, the person claiming such revelation is in a hostile relationship with God, and it is not worth the paper it is printed on.

We live in a time when Christians are being inundated by false teaching. There are few Christian television programs worthy of the name; Christian radio is often a hodgepodge of true and false teachers with no distinction made between the two; Christian book stores are often a minefield laced with some of the very worst of false teachers. Many well intentioned Christians lend their name to whatever is being promoted. For instance, Michael W. Smith heavily endorsed the fictional and heretical book *The Shack* which blends Christianity with Eastern and New Age thought, saying that it will change a person's relationship with God forever. No doubt that is true - but not in a positive way. How can it draw+change a person's relationship with God? The beloved Charles Swindoll endorsed the popular *Wild at Heart*, calling it *the best, most insightful book I have read in at least the last five years.* But the book promotes the heretical views of Open Theism and looks to movies and pop culture, not Scripture for its authority. It is so full of unbiblical content and outright error that even *Christianity Today* felt compelled to write a negative review and issue a warning. How can it draw+

provide any insight into the mind of God or promote godly lives? According to Jeremiah, books such as these provide not the slightest benefit and are in fact spiritually toxic. So why are they enthusiastically endorsed by well-known Christians?

So many Christians today are willing to legitimize any book, any teaching, and any person, no matter how erroneous that even remotely professes to be Christian on the grounds that God could use or has used these things to help someone or bring someone to salvation. This is a dangerous error. I personally know people who were saved while members of a cult, but that does not justify the cult. Just because God can, and sometimes does save people through unusual means does not give us license to legitimize or adopt the means. God has often accomplished His purposes through the agency of sinful, wicked men, but we still identify the men and their actions as sinful and wicked. In the same way, error is still error; falsehood is still false and cannot be legitimized simply because it professes to be Christian or produces the desired results. It must be identified for what it is otherwise we stand in danger of promoting error or heresy. There has never been a more challenging time to be a pastor, and unless a pastor loves his flock enough to risk being unpopular and teach them this kind of discernment they will be tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men (Eph 4 :14). Satan still masquerades as an angel of light; he specializes in deception (Rev 20:7, 8), and equally alarming is that his servants still disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:14, 15). No false teacher wears a label warning that they promote spiritually toxic teachings, but rather they promote themselves as servants of righteousness; they are wolves in sheep's clothing; outwardly they appear righteous to men.

Today the church is overrun with people from the many group preaching enjoyable sermons. The Jesus who is preached and taught today is the Jesus that will draw the biggest crowd. And the Jesus that attracts the largest crowd is the Jesus that will preserve and boost our self-esteem, the Jesus Who longs to gratify our worldly desires, Who will impart extra-biblical revelation so we don't have to consult and study Scripture, and Whose highest goal is our happiness. He will never crush our pride, demand that we abandon all we hold dear to follow Him, or limit our knowledge of Him to what is revealed in Scripture. The Jesus of today lives to placate a sinner's guilt ridden conscience rather than wound and pierce his conscience. His death on the cross is touted as proof of our infinite self-worth rather than proof of our infinite need, inability, and desperate sin cursed condition. The purpose of His atoning sacrifice is hailed as His means of restoring our dignity which sin has robbed from us. The Jesus of today only asks that we allow Him the privilege of helping us fulfill our self-serving goals and desires. The Jesus of today worships us, He makes no demands, but only hopes and

pleads we will acknowledge Him while we worship ourselves. Now that is a Jesus even an unbeliever can enjoy.

In its desire to impact the culture the modern church has almost universally adopted a policy of innovation to the detriment of faithfulness to God's prescribed principles. Some innovations are to be embraced, otherwise we would still be reading hand written Bibles. But most should be approached with extreme caution, especially when they relate to God's prescriptions for how He is to be worshipped and the ministry of the word. Most innovation is driven by nothing more than pragmatism. Nadab and Abihu attempted to be innovative when they ~~offered~~ strange fire before the Lord *which He had not commanded them*+(Nm 10:1), and with disastrous personal consequences. They were consumed by the wrath of God.

Jeroboam introduced innovative worship practices into the northern kingdom of Israel, and his rationale for doing so bears a striking resemblance to the arguments for promoting innovation today. He appealed to the people's own self-interest; ~~It's~~ too much for you to go up to Jerusalem+(1 Kg 12:28). He claimed there was no real difference between the two forms of worship, rather his method was more accommodating and designed to appeal to a broader segment of the culture. But not one of his innovations was designed to promote the worship of the One true God, but rather to draw people away from the true worship of God to himself. He even appointed priests to lead the people in this new, innovative form of worshiping God, with no regard to their qualifications for the office (1 Kg 12:31; 13:33). However, all of Jeroboam's innovations were just a counterfeit version of true worship and a product of his own mind, not the mind of God, which eventually led the people into gross idolatry and apostasy (1 Kg 12:32, 33). After centuries of idolatry, disobedience, and continuous rejection of God's prophetic warnings, God destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel by the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C. (2 Kg 17:5-23). And the polluted fountain from which flowed all of Israel's wretched apostasies for which God judged them was the innovative worship introduced by Jeroboam; ~~Then~~ Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the Lord, and made them commit a great sin+(2 Kg 17:21). Even the southern kingdom of Judah was eventually polluted by Jeroboam's innovations; ~~Also~~ Judah did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God, but walked in the customs *which Israel had introduced*+(2 Kg 17:19).

The same is true today. Most of what claims to be innovative in the church is simply the inventions of man's pragmatic mind, not derived from God's revelation. Ever since the fall of our ancestor Adam this has been the practice of mankind, not so much the out and out rejection of God's prescriptions, but adding something of their own inventions to it. False teachers don't deny the gospel, rather they pervert it; they add their own

inventions. Where will man find the humility to stop adding to God's prescriptions once he has the presumption to begin? If God's word is not the standard for our worship what will our standard be other than our own desires and self-gratification? How meaningless will be the excuse that God has not forbidden this or that, when He asks us where or when did He command this or that? Is God not wise enough to prescribe the form of His own worship? Has He left the worship of Himself to the whims of human fancy and imagination? Rather than promoting true worship, all man's inventions simply appeal to the flesh and pander to the natural man's narcissistic bent to self-gratification.

Everything from diluted sermons that placate the conscience and affirm the intrinsic self-worth of man, to entertainment driven, irreverent, and syrupy sentimental music devoid of any substantive lyrics, to multi-site churches and crass party atmospheres which ignore God's demands for holiness, to ministries that segregate the church from cradle to grave, to claims of personal messages from God; all are designed to scintillate the flesh and focus the attention on self and self-gratification, not the One who is to be the object of our worship.

The leaven of Jeroboam's innovations eventually infected the southern kingdom of Judah, and so have many of the innovations of the church growth movement and the charismatic movement created a system of worship that is anything but biblical. They simply perpetuate man's ultimate idolatry . the worship of self and the world . only now this idolatry is legitimized because it has been given a religious extreme makeover. It is like a person who owns a McDonald's franchise and wants to change the menu but still call it a McDonald's. Much of the church today wants to jettison all but the most superficial attributes of a true church and still call itself the church. They want to change the substance but keep the golden arches, and they want to replace God's infallible and sufficient revelation with man's pragmatic innovations and subjective personal experiences.

There is an almost unanimous consensus within the church today that the church must adapt to meet the needs of a changing culture. We are told that we live in a different age where people have different needs. We live in the information age where the explosion in technology has created new challenges for the church. The seeker sensitive movement has sought to meet these alleged new challenges by changing the way we do church, and the Emergent movement has sought to redefine the church and its message. Both movements have influenced and infected the church with a malignant and pernicious form of false Christianity that offers salvation without repentance. Like the false prophets of Israel they announce peace, peace+when there is no peace. Hardly a week goes by where a new book is not telling us of some new way to modernize the message and ministry of the church. But the truth is, the age in which we live is completely irrelevant. Why? Because God is still the same God and the changing of the times does not make the slightest difference to Him. God's character is

still what He has always revealed it to be, and He revealed His character in the Ten Commandments given to Moses. He is still a God who hates sin and will punish sin. God never changes.

It is also equally true that the message of Scripture never changes. Today there is much talk of making the Bible ~~relevant~~ to a new generation of Christians. In fact, ~~relevant~~ has become one of the new buzz words within the church, along with ~~authentic~~, ~~radical~~, ~~innovative~~, ~~intentional~~ and ~~missional~~ but no one seems to be able to define what these terms mean. The superficiality of what passes for ~~relevant~~ can be seen in the recent explosion of new Bible editions aimed at every demographic imaginable. There is a pink bedazzled ~~Princess Bible~~ for that rare little girl who might not already be totally self-absorbed, a camouflage Bible for that extra pious deer hunter, or maybe Mossy Oak just makes the Bible seem manlier, and for that environmentally conscious Christian there is a ~~Green~~ Bible, printed on recycled paper with soy ink no less, and all the passages relating to the earth printed in green. Is this what it means to be relevant; Bibles customized to your personality? Most attempts at being ~~relevant~~ today would by another generation of Christians have been called by other names; names such as worldly, self-centered, and irreverent. Scripture does not need to be made relevant; it is relevant because it is God's living and active word. It is timeless truth; therefore it is always relevant, irrespective of the age. The message of the Bible does not need to be embellished, made ~~cool~~, apologized for, or made contemporary, it just needs to be taught. The job of the preacher is not to bring the Bible into our age, but to take the Christian back to the time of the biblical author and explain Scripture in its own context. Scripture never changes and is therefore always relevant. Scripture only becomes irrelevant when the church pushes it aside in favor of pragmatic innovations.

Not only does God not change and Scripture not change, but it is equally true that man never changes. Because times have changed does that mean man has changed? Has increased technology changed the morality of man? Has technology made man more moral, or has it just expanded his access to immorality? Has man given up his self-absorption and rebellion against God just because he can Facebook and Twitter? Has man ceased to be driven by his lust for self-worship and self-gratification, and has all his sinful passions and evil desires come to an end because of access to the Internet? Has his heart been transformed because he has an i-phone? The answer of course is that all of this does not make the slightest difference, and they are completely irrelevant. The problem of man is the same as it has always been from the beginning. Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Cain killed Abel. Jacob lied to Isaac. Joseph's brothers envied and hated him. Sodom and Gomorrah practiced gross, unnatural immorality. Israel joined the pagan nations in murdering their own children. It is all still with us. These are

the problems of life, and the age of information has nothing to do with it. The problem is within man, and all these other things do not affect it.

We need to get rid of this notion that because we are in a different age we need something new. More often than not this is a death knell for the church. Is the culture to influence the church, or is the church to influence the culture? Are Christians not called to be salt and light? What happens when salt loses its saltiness? Every culture is a reflection of the dominant beliefs of the people within that culture, and ours is no exception. The dominant object of worship within our culture is self and the world, and the values and behavior of society reflect this. The church dare not adapt to this or any culture, because when it does it ceases to be the church. Christians are to repudiate and expose the values of the world as sin, not adapt to them (Eph 5:11, 12). How much adaptation is too much? Who decides? How much of the world can the church assimilate and still be the church?

God is a God of means, and the means which He has instituted for us must be the best available to bring about the conviction and conversion of sinners, and the most conducive for our sanctification. They are doubtless far superior to anything we can devise for ourselves, but that doesn't stop us from trying. And what means has God ordained for the conversion of sinners and sanctification of saints; only the faithful teaching and preaching of His word. It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation (Rm 1:16); we are born again through the living and abiding *word* of God (1 Pt 1:23); it is the Spirit which gives life, and *the words* which Jesus spoke are spirit and life (Jn 6:63); He brought us forth by the *word* of truth (Jm 1:18); Christians are sanctified by the truth of God's *word* (Jn 17:17).

The Bible is full of examples to show us that if God's word will not convict and convert sinners, nothing else will. If they do not believe Moses and the prophets they will not believe if someone rises from the dead (Lk 16:31). If this was true of those who had only the Old Testament, how much more is it true today where we have the entire canon of Scripture; we have much more divine truth fully revealed and explained; we have more divine light made abundantly clear in Scripture.

When we read about the nation of Israel in the Old Testament we often wonder at the nation's hardness of heart, even after experiencing all of God's miracles in Egypt and in the wilderness. We marvel at the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees and Jews to Jesus's teaching, and how they hated and rejected Him even in the face of all His miracles. But we have even more reason to wonder at ourselves because we have the same hearts they had; we have more of God's word to influence us than they had. If we will not believe Moses and the prophets and Jesus and the apostles, what will we believe? If we

deem His full revelation insufficient, what more will it take to convince us? If people will not be convicted and converted by God's word then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead, or if an angel comes from heaven, or if the preacher is. Cool and hip, wears tattered jeans and a graphic T-shirt, and sports a frohawk, a soul-patch, and a few tattoos.

The Pharisees said, Let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him (Mt 27:42). No they would not! If the means God had appointed would not lead them to repentance and salvation, nothing else would. But sadly the same mindset dominates most of the church today: If we could only connect with this group, or if we could only get this guest speaker, or if we could only package the message in an attractive enough way, or if we spice up our worship service, or if we try this new program, or if we have an eye-catching website, or if we have a fancy building with plenty of parking, or if we can stimulate people's emotions and overload their senses and manufacture a worship experience or if we water down the message and shorten the sermon, or if we cater to a particular age group, or if we have a killer children's program or an awesome youth group, or if we can make church fun, then we can reach people with the gospel; what nonsense; what foolish, unbiblical thinking. From cover to cover the testimony of Scripture is the exact opposite. If God's means are not sufficient then nothing else is.

One of the most overlooked warnings in Scripture is Jesus' warning found in Mark 8:34-38 concerning the cost of discipleship, particularly verse 38: For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. How many churches would be ashamed to say that all they do is teach and preach God's word? What sort of programs do you have? None; we just teach and preach Scripture. What activities do you have for my kids? None; we just teach and preach Scripture. Do you have a youth group and college ministry? No, we just teach and preach Scripture so you as a parent can be equipped to be biblical parents. What is there for me to do when I come to your church? Listen to the teaching and preaching of Scripture, apply it to your life, be disciplined, and pray. Is that all you do? Yep. Many churches actually boast about how short the sermon is or how brief the teaching time is so they can have more time for fun.

What has a greater tendency to move and convict sinners or edify and sanctify believers? What has a greater authority behind it? What is more likely to impact the mind and heart; someone's subjective personal experience and testimony, our own pragmatic and culturally relevant innovations, or the testimony of God Himself? If people are unmoved by the searching power of God's word, what will move them? What if God

sent messengers to warn and teach us, perhaps many in succession, but they all went unheeded, What if some of these messengers performed miraculous signs and wonders such as calling down fire from heaven, and they were still ridiculed and ignored. What if God finally took upon Himself human flesh and lived among us, teaching and warning us? But isn't that exactly what He did? Yet in spite of all His miracles, and all His signs and wonders, Jesus was rejected, despised, and even murdered by those He came to save, and although He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him+(Jn 12:37). They were by nature the same sinners as people today.

Innovation is good when it helps disseminate truth more effectively and reach more people with the gospel. But truth can never be sacrificed or undermined by the church's attempts at innovation. Ultimately what many of these attempts at innovation reveal is a complete lack of confidence in the sufficiency of God's word to transform hearts and minds, and the end result is to lead people away from Scripture, not to Scripture. True salvation always results in a transformed life, the pursuit of holiness, and a hunger for spiritual truth. The gross biblical and theological illiteracy that currently dominates the church should be ample evidence that the church's attempts at innovation have been a colossal failure. The fact that Scripture seems to have virtually no impact on the day to day lives of professing Christians should tell us that whatever the church is doing, it is not making disciples. That the thinking of most professing Christians is dominated, influenced, and prejudiced by the world and conformed to the world shows that they are not being transformed by the renewing of their mind (Rm 12:2). We should use every means at our disposal to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ without violating God's established principles. All too often the methods adopted by the church in the name of innovation deny in practice what we say we believe in principle. A church may have solid teaching, but still fail to apply the principles it teaches to the methodologies it employs. God's principles for how He is to be worshiped are timeless; "By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored+(Lv 10:3). We ignore God's Scriptural warnings to our peril (Hb 12:25).

Our culture is decaying around us at breakneck speed. In less than a generation behavior that has historically been considered destructive to society and individuals has now been institutionalized as a constitutional right. The salt has traded its saltiness for a pair of tattered blue jeans, graphic T-shirt, entertainment driven worship, worldly innovations, self-esteem, cultural relevance, and a fun time for all. It has all been tried before with tragic consequences. Man is still trying to be as wise as God. There is nothing new under the sun.