

## Reclaiming Truth in a World of Distraction

### I. Diversions Galore

If you've ever witnessed an episode of the hit-TV show *24*, you are well aware of the intense emotional rollercoaster ride that it involves. Each season sets anew the record for the most intense 24 hrs that mankind has ever seen.

This year's storyline began with the violent kidnapping of the Secretary of Defense. The terrorist's plan was to broadcast his trial for "crimes against humanity" and subsequent execution to the world over the Internet. Luckily the ex-head of the Counter Terrorism Unit, Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland, storms the warehouse where the Secretary of Defense was being held, and saves the day. Yet, just when the world seemed safe, the bad guys were dead, and we thought that the world would live to see another day, the plot took a turn for the worse. The execution was merely a diversion.

What the terrorists really had in mind would not only embarrass the greatest super power on this planet, but it could claim the lives of 5-10 million of its citizens. The government had been working on a top secret device that could remotely control the 100+ nuclear power plants in the country. This device had, unbeknownst to the US, fallen into the hands of the terrorists. While this device could take control of them in order to divert disaster, it could also cause meltdowns resulting in multiple nuclear tragedies. The capture of the Secretary of defense was merely meant to serve as a distraction for a much more heinous scheme of events.

Diversion. It's not a bad word. It's actually something that most of us cannot live without. Most of us spend our week stressed out, bogged down, and under the gun. So, what do we do? We fill our free time with fishing, shopping, golfing, and the TV—relaxing distractions.

Pascal once said, "The only thing that consoles us from our miseries is diversion."<sup>1</sup> Douglas Groothuis, a popular modern author, echoes Pascal: "Diversion serves to distract humans from a plight too terrible to encounter directly—namely, our mortality, finitude, and failures."<sup>2</sup> What profound statements.

One of my closest family members has been in and out of the hospital for the last three months. She has been a faithful church member for decades now, but unfortunately faithful to an Arminian church—the same denomination that I grew up under.

I was raised to believe that heaven was only attainable for the faithful and I knew at the age of 12 that I did not come close to fitting into the Arminian hall of fame. Hence, I would lie in bed at night worrying that I would wake up in hell because I was a sinner. My only hope was the sinner's prayer that I repeated nightly.

I look back at this system with anger now that I see one of my loved ones in the hospital unsure of her destiny. All her pastors of almost 4 decades knew to do was to pray for her. Apparently they left their copies of the gospel of John at home. Before you go on worrying about her, I shared the gospel with her and she believed it. My only regret is that I didn't do it soon enough. You see, it is no wonder why, but for the last fifteen years of her life she has done little more than watch TV and gamble. She needed something to distract her from the misery of life. She went to church every Sunday, but found no hope there. For decades her closest friends were also faithful church members, yet she still came up empty when it came to the truth of the gospel.

Maybe the reason our churches are more concerned with community centers than Christianity today is because they need something to distract them from the truth because the truth is, by and large, that those who call themselves Christian and those who do not are not certain of where their true destiny lies. Thus, for the majority, diversion is the only true way to live. Whether Christian or non-

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<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), fragment 414.

<sup>2</sup> Groothuis, 451.

Christian, people are dying to avoid the only certain absolute that the church has to offer—you can't be sure where you're going until you die.

## II. Technotainment: Entertaining Ourselves to Death

The 21st Century is an unparalleled period in time where distraction is only a moment away. It is the century of instant entertainment where 2/3 of Americans carry a phone in their pocket, there are 50 million game consoles that allow you to be anyone from Tiger Woods to a highly skilled assassin, almost 2/3 of Americans own a computer that at the stroke of a finger can reach out to any country in the world,<sup>3</sup> and almost every home in American has a TV. We are bombarded by technology.

Almost half a century ago, reality was taken from outside the home and placed in a little box—a box that encourages us to sit back and relax. The modern television. Wide screen, flat panel, and digitally enabled. Don't worry about thinking, it will think for you. We are now able to disengage our minds and veg. It is the place where reality and fantasy become one.

The television is by far the most influential device ever created. It is on almost 8 hours a day in the average American home where the typical viewer watches 4 hours of TV each and every day. Half of all US households own three TVs or more.

Undoubtedly, today's programming is highly evolved. We've come along way since "The Family Feud." Reality TV has become an obsession, a drug. It's like prozac for the depressed TV enthusiast and a cost-efficient babysitter for the stressed out stay at home mom.

In a matter of seconds, we are transported from a life of boredom, without purpose or dreams, with only a grim uncertain future, to a world where everything is amazing, anyone can be a star, and life never ceases to electrify the soul. Reality TV has become the fad. There's...

- The Amazing Race where contestants race around the world, competing for a million dollars. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to travel the world and have the possibility to win a million dollars?
- Survivor where a group lives on a deserted island and competes for a million dollars. Sounds like every boys dream, huh?
- American Idol where stars are born.
- The Bachelor and The Bachelorette where true love is discovered.
- Temptation Island where lust is satisfied.
- Nanny 911 where we become thankful that we're not that bad off.
- CSI, Law & Order, 24, and ER where the mundane cares of life are exchanged for thrill and an adrenaline rush.

Techno-tainment has become an obsession in modern American culture. Peter Kreeft astutely observes: "Diversion's greatest danger is that it acts like a sedative; it keeps us just content enough so that we don't make waves and seek a real cure. It deadens our spiritual nerves, it muffles our alarm system."<sup>4</sup> We can't get enough. The television, game consoles, movies, and the internet have become an obsession, a drug, dulling the senses and transporting us to a better reality. Blaise Pascal wrote, "As men are not able to fight against death, misery, ignorance, they have taken it into their heads, in order to be happy, not to think of them at all."

We have turned our minds on idle. And just in case you think that the Christian culture is any different. Let's look at some statistics:

Technology	2003	2003 NOT
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<sup>3</sup> A recent study revealed that the average online gamer spends 20-25 hours per week playing online games and another 10-15 hours per week on the internet (Tech TV, "Screen Savers," March 10, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 186.

	BORN AGAIN	BORN AGAIN
Cellular telephone	68%	64%
Digital Camera	36%	36%
GPS System for car	8%	8%
DVD Player	56%	55%
Satellite Dish for TV	29%	27%
Home Theater System	30%	34%
CD-ROM for PC	57%	58%
Desktop Computer	57%	57%
Laptop/notebook PC	22%	23%
Palmtop computer	14%	15%
Home Internet Access	59%	59%
Internet access on another computer	34%	37%
High Speed Internet	23%	24%

What do these statistics tell us? There is almost no difference between Christian and non-Christian culture in this area. Whether Christian or non-Christian, Americans are choosing to inundate themselves with technology.

Owning these technologies does not mean that we are sinning. If that was the case, I would be the chief of sinners. The majority of my day involves technology. And I, like many people in the Dallas Fort Worth area, don't have a home phone because it has been replaced by my cell. I'm not saying that technology is bad. Technology can be very good. My workshop yesterday demonstrated how technology can make those who minister even more effective. But, as Douglas Groothuis points out, "Diversions and the omnipresent noise and clutter of contemporary culture erect barriers to the serious and disciplined pursuit of truth."<sup>5</sup> What I am saying is that technology comes at a price. If we're not careful, we run the risk of tuning out.

### III. Certainty: A Lost Commodity

Pascal once said that there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who have given up to despair or don't think, and truth seekers. Where have all of the truth seekers gone? Have they all tuned out?

We live in an age where tolerance is a virtue. Those with dogmatic beliefs are arrogant and those who are highly devoted are the heroes.

When questioned about Mother Theresa's eternal destiny, a pastor of a sizeable Bible church once stated that he for one would not send her to hell just because she had a little "works baggage." At this same church, one of the ministry directors thought it would be more helpful to lead his people through a popular Christian book. When some asked if they could study the Bible instead, he said, "Not that I don't think the Bible would be helpful, but our goal here is cultivating community and I think these books will help us do that more effectively." A few left but the majority stayed. The world shuns truth for good reason, it testifies to the fact that they don't have any hope. But even in our churches there is a clear shift away from truth toward the heart and devotion.

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Why Truth Matters Most: An Apologetic for Truth-Seeking in Postmodern Times," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (September 2004):453.

Douglas Webster in an article entitled “Evangelizing the Church” tells a story of an unequally yoked couple, the husband was an unbeliever and the wife was a believer. The wife regularly attended church, but the husband refused. The man’s Christian church-going wife was certain that their marriage problems were due to her husband’s unbelief. So, Webster invited him to his office to talk. After several minutes of conversation, the husband asked pointedly, “Do you think it is ok for my teenage daughter to invite her boyfriend to stay the night at our house in her bed? My wife, one of your church members, does.” With a confused and concerned look, the man grievously said, “She believes that Jesus desires intimacy in all of our relationships. I’m sorry but I think that is wrong.” The non-Christian had better morals and was more in line with Scripture than the Christian. Objective truth, even in our churches, has lost its place.

This is true in our churches, but our theological institutions are not immune. I remember my days at Dallas Seminary where I had the opportunity to take a theology class from a well-known dispensationalist on campus. I enjoyed his class, learned a great deal of theology, and was grateful that he used the Bible to back it up. It came as a shock to me to hear that others did not have the same sentiments. They complained that he was arrogant given his constant “proof-texting.” “He has a Bible verse for every doctrine,” they’d say. Are we giving up on truth? The world has good reason to shun it. But, truth *is* what sets us free. Only the truth of our hope in Christ Jesus can allow us to experience life abundant and life eternal.

Unfortunately, truth has become a lost commodity. Winston Churchill once said, “Men occasionally stumble over truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.” The truth hurts and for some it is a prison. Thus, tolerance has become the new virtue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Two thirds of non-Christian adults believe that truth is relative to the person and their situation. Alarmingly, eighty-three percent of non-Christian teenagers concur.

It isn’t a surprise that the world is shunning truth since it only reveals the fact that they are sinful, in need of a solution (i.e., Christ), and hence perishing. But sadly, it seems that the world is having more of an impact on Christendom than the other way around.

Amazingly, 56% of B-A Christians are not absolutely certain about moral truth. 35% of ba Christians, as Barna defines them, believe that those who do not accept Jesus Christ as Savior will be condemned to hell. 10% believe that incarnation is a possibility, 30% believe that all religions teach the same basic principles. 24% believe that Jesus Christ wasn’t sinless, almost half believe that the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power, but is not a living entity. 26% believe that whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know. To make sense of this, they surveyed ba Christians to see how often they read their Bible, and only 40% read their Bible once a week. Apparently, truth is just not that important anymore.

Yet, 96% believe that it is important to experience spiritual growth. 91% believe that it is more important to please God than to achieve success or acceptance. 83% pray to God weekly. And 92% believe that angels exist and influence people’s lives. Christendom is by and large ignorant of even the milk of the word. Even worse, it doesn’t much matter to them.

It is clear, Christians value spirituality, what “benefits” them, but not truth. Thus, we have highly devoted followers who don’t understand the basics of the Word of God. They are almost satisfied with uncertainty—with no truth at all. Dr. Bill Bright said, “Surveys indicate that 50 percent of the church members in the United States are not sure Christ is in their lives. These are good people. Often, they have served faithfully in their church for years. And yet, they still have no assurance of Christ’s abiding presence, no confidence that, if they died today, they would go to be with the Lord in heaven.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.transferableconcepts.com/transconcepts/english/christian/index.html>

It is impossible to be an effective fully devoted follower of Christ if you're not sure where you will spend eternity when you die. In fact, it is impossible to even have a relationship with God without first being sure of his promise of eternal life. Unfortunately, uncertainty is increasingly becoming a prized commodity in Evangelicalism.

This sad trend has been picked up and capitalized by what is called the emergent church. Not all who are in the emergent church are pushing uncertainty, but some of its leaders are.

Last year Dallas Seminary offered a seminar on Postmodernism led by Brian McLaren, one of the most popular Evangelical authors on the subject. I knew when I signed up for the seminar that I was going to learn about postmodernism. What I didn't know was that McLaren was going to teach me about postmodernism first hand. I didn't realize that he was postmodern himself. If I had to sum up his advice I would say, "In order to reach the postmodern culture, you have to become somewhat postmodern yourself." In April 2004, he was asked to present a paper at the Billy Graham Evangelism center's conference on "Issues of Truth and Power: The Gospel in a Post-Christian Culture." Interestingly, he writes,

I think most Christians grossly misunderstand the philosophical baggage associated with terms like *absolute* and *objective* (linked to foundationalism and the myth of neutrality)... Similarly, arguments that pit absolutism versus relativism and objectivism versus subjectivism prove meaningless or absurd to postmodern people: they're wonderful modern arguments that backfire with people from the emerging culture.<sup>7</sup>

If they don't like the truth, try something else. What else is there? Uncertainty?! Strikingly enough, he believes that doubt is a doorway to spiritual growth. In a recent article he writes,

Maybe you think I'm suggesting that doubt can actually be virtuous. I suppose I am—but not always. There is a dark kind of doubt, an exaggerated and self-destructive kind of doubt, that leads to despair, depression, and spiritual self-sabotage. I think of it like this: an imagination is good, but imagination out of control is called psychosis. Fear is healthy, but fear out of control is called paranoia. Sensitivity is a wonderful gift, and anger is a necessary emotion, but sensitivity or anger out of control can lead to depression. Doubt is the same way. Out of control, it becomes unbelief, a hard heart, an arrogant or defeatist cynicism. But in balance, it is our Geiger counter for error. Without it, we'd be gullible, naïve, stupid...not great spiritual qualities!<sup>8</sup>

Doubt in McLaren's mind is virtuous. Uncertainty can be a good thing. Is this what we find in the New Testament? Did Jesus come so that "He who believes in Me though he were (or may still be) dead might (if he's lucky) have life (if all of this is really true)"? This is sad, but unfortunately this is where we are headed.

#### **IV. Nothing But the Truth**

The apostle John had a bit of a truth decay in his day as well. In his first epistle he wrote to those who like us, stood at a fork in the road. The false teachers, whose end was destruction, called out to them saying, "Come, abide with us." Yet, John charged them to stand tall, to not become distracted.

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<sup>7</sup> Brian McLaren, "The Strategy We Pursue," presented at the Billy Graham Center Evangelism Roundtable "Issues of Truth and Power: The Gospel in a Post-Christian Culture" on *April 22-24, 2004*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Brian McLaren, "Doubt: The Tides of Faith," [www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000159.html](http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000159.html).

He wrote, “Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning.” What John was teaching was of no surprise. They’d been hearing it since the very beginning. How often do we tell our kids that God’s Word can be trusted and that anyone who says otherwise is a liar? I am blessed to have two parents that instilled in me at a very young age that God’s Word was true. I have carried that foundation with me through life.

John continues, “If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.” Thus, if we don’t accept what God has promised, fellowship is broken.

John continues, “And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life.” There were evidently many who claimed that God’s promise of eternal life was not true. Notice what John said, “that He has promised *us*.” Who? Us. John sure was arrogant to think that he and those he was writing to were regenerate. He was sure and he wanted nothing less than that for those who followed him.

Do we teach that God’s Word promises eternal life to all who believe in Him for it? Let’s go a little bit further. Do we tolerate those among us who contradict this promise? We must stand strong on this. Those who contradicted this point in John’s day were deceivers. They were not in fellowship with the Father. They are not people that we want teaching our Sunday school classes and Bible studies.

John writes, “These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.” It doesn’t matter what motivation someone has, if it contradicts Scripture, it is deceptive. Their aim is to persuade you that God’s promise is not true. Their aim is to deceive.

It is of utmost importance that this truth abides in us so that we abide in the Son and the Father...ultimately so “that when He appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (2:28). We must be certain about God’s Word so that we will certainly be confident at His coming. There is no room for doubt here.

#### **V. Christianity’s Trojan Horse**

The stories of the Trojan Horse and the fall of Troy are a well known in Greek mythology. The Trojan War had drawn out for many years and so Odysseus hatched a plan to finally destroy Troy. After a fierce battle between the Greeks and the Trojans, the Greeks set fire to their camps, left a large horse as an offering to the goddess Athena, and set sail. The Trojans having been convinced that the Greek’s gave up and that the horse was merely an offering, they brought the horse within the city gates. Unbeknownst to the Trojans, the horse was filled with the greatest Greek warriors. “It was midnight,” according to the Little Iliad, when the Greeks climbed out of the horse and let the rest of the Greek army in through the city gates. The Trojans were soundly defeated from within.

The world constructed a Trojan horse out of uncertainty and has distracted Christianity by the cares of this world. It lay just outside Christianity’s gates and she couldn’t resist. She brought it in and fell asleep. Soon, if she does not arise, this lack of passion for truth will conquer her from within. The battle is about to rage. What will she do? What will *we* do?

The church of Colossi was on the verge of being distracted from the truth through human philosophy and deception. After several chapters explaining why Christ and His Word were superior, Paul wrote, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly [or abundantly] in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16). This was the summation of all which preceded. The Word of God is to take up home within us so that we can stand strong as a church, building up the saints. It is the picture of a strongly knitted garment, unable to be ripped apart because *truth* is woven throughout all of its members. May truth always be our focus. May we never be distracted and deceived by the world. The world has good reason to be distracted. The truth only foretells their fate. Thus, for them, there is nothing at stake and everything to gain. But, for us, there is much at stake for truth to us is our only hope.