



Random Thoughts, Vol. 8

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If this "Random Thoughts" column is new to you, then here is a quick introduction. Below is a collection of my own observations, thoughts, and insights which may or may not prove to be a blessing to others. Each of these is not long enough to warrant an entire article on its own, but begged to be written down nonetheless.

"Relevance And Preaching"

4/18/2013

Relevant is a catchword among modern pastors and church leaders. There is a constant pressure on churches, pastors, teachers, and leaders of all sorts to be relevant. No church wants to be left behind because they are irrelevant. No pastor wants their preaching to be labeled irrelevant.

So, we are told today that the secret to church growth, popularity, and success is found in *relevance*. A church will only be as successful as they are relevant. In fact, if you want to see how deeply this notion has embedded itself into modern evangelicalism, do a Google search for "relevant church." It seems that everyone wants to be relevant. Relevant even has its own magazine (www.relevantmagazine.com)!

Of course, if a church is going to be relevant, then they need to have a relevant-looking pastor who preaches relevant messages. From what I have seen, "relevant-looking" ends up meaning "an ape of the culture." It seems that once your pastor is indistinguishable from your average GQ model, Gap Clothing-wearing, free-trade-coffee-latte-sipping, pierced, Prius-hybrid-driving worldly pagan, then, and only then, can you say he is approaching *relevance*.

Of course, they feel the need to aim for relevance in preaching as well. After all, being considered irrelevant is a bigger crime in modern evangelicalism than calling a heretic a heretic.

We are told by "church growth experts" that people want to see how the Bible applies to their everyday life.

People need to have the Bible speak to them where they are at. They need to have it in their language. As it turns out, relevance in preaching ends up being preaching that meets some felt need.

The irony in all of this is that doctrine is sidelined and the Bible ends up fading deep into the background. The result is that people don't end up seeing how the Bible applies to their lives at all. Instead, they get a list of principles, duties, requirements, or feel-good Oprah-type hype to speak to them "where they are at."

Consider what you might encounter from a typical sermon in one of these "relevant" churches: 5 Principles for a Better Marriage, 4 Relationship Strategies, 3 Keys to Raising Children, 6 Blah Blah Blah, etc. Churches are constantly chasing cultural fads and fashions in an attempt to ape the culture. They try to pluck some phenomenon from the headlines and parlay it into a sermon series. I recently heard of one series called "Don't Duck Your Dynasty," obviously intended to piggyback on the popularity of a cable TV program. This is what is meant by relevance. Being relevant means being indistinguishable from the culture.

Consequently, the sermon becomes a collection of the pastor's ingenuity, creativity, and insight. The Bible is quoted only if a passage can be found that in some way props up the point that the preacher wants to make. If no verse can be found, then there are always plenty of translations and paraphrases which can be used to make it appear as if the Bible is in agreement. The Bible gets left in the dust, because exposition of Scripture just isn't relevant.

Sadly, the people of God get nothing more than finely dressed law in "relevant clothing." Sermons are a list of DOs and DON'Ts, principles, keys, strategies, and means to some seemingly sanctified end. Following their path to a better life becomes exhausting!

There is a more excellent way: *true* relevance.

I believe that there is nothing more relevant than to teach the meaning of the Word of God - to expound Scripture so thoroughly and fully that the hearer can see the meaning and intention of the passage for themselves. *That* is relevant.

Scripture doesn't need to be made relevant. It already is. It needs to be explained so that people can hear it and understand it. The goal of preaching should be to explain the meaning of the Scripture so clearly and completely that the application of the passage becomes so obvious that it doesn't even have to be mentioned. Then everything we do is driven, informed, constrained, motivated, and governed in every way by God's Word. That is relevance!

The church has moved away from doctrinal, detailed, strong preaching, because, somewhere along the way, someone convinced church leaders that that wasn't "relevant." The noise that has rushed to fill its place has proved to be an insipid and pathetic substitute. The modern pursuit of relevance has proven to be a never-ending run after a mirage. Having exchanged eternal truth for the culture's passing fads, the "relevant church" ends up being no more lasting than yesterday's worn headlines.

Chronological Snobbery

4/23/13

It was C.S. Lewis who first coined the term "Chronological Snobbery," and I like it. Lewis notes that it was his chronological snobbery which posed a large obstacle in coming to faith in Christ. Lewis wondered what a 2,000-year-old religion could possibly offer to him in his present situation, with his very contemporary needs.

Lewis defined chronological snobbery as "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited."¹ In other words, if it is old, it should be discarded. It is the belief that whatever has passed out of favor and fashion has nothing to say to our ever-changing and pressing present situation. After all, if it were relevant, it would still be fashionable.

When you start looking for chronological snobbery in the world and in the church, you will see it everywhere. As I noted above, the church has largely abandoned doctrinal expository preaching. Why? Because it no longer works? No. It has been abandoned as a relic of a bygone era. It was fashionable back in the early church, then the 1500s, and then last century. But today, in the modern church, we need something contemporary. We need something that fits the

1 http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/596

spirit of our age. These men believe we have moved beyond the simplistic and antique methods of the earlier and unenlightened ages. We need video clips, poems, and themed sermons. At the root of this abandonment of common sense and divine call is nothing less than chronological snobbery: the belief that what was fashionable years ago has nothing to do with us and our needs.

Take a tour through your average Christian bookstore and you are not likely to find many books offered for sale that are more than ten years old. You will not find a Puritan section. The bestsellers are not works by John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, or B.B. Warfield. They are the new titles. The church does not seem interested in the least with what the old, dead guys might have to say.

Oh, you'll manage to stumble across an occasional older title here and there, but it is not common. The average Christian consumer doesn't think that a book written before the invention of the Internet by Al Gore has anything to teach us.

You see it among our "leaders" and probably nowhere more pronounced than in all the discussion about gay marriage. There is a push among proponents of the gay agenda to simply jettison the teachings and moral standards of humanity from the last 6,000 years.

The moral standards of previous generations are ignored. Does anyone seem to care what homosexual conduct and acceptance has done to cultures and nations that have come before? Does anyone care what lessons can be learned from previous cultures that embraced homosexuality? What moral principles guided our founders, or the great divines of the church for the last 2,000 years? None of that seems to matter.

Everyone wants to move beyond the old viewpoints, the old morals, the old way of looking at things. They are rushing to adopt a cultural convention, gay marriage, that is newer to our vocabulary than the words cell phone. The reasoning, the arguments, the thinking and lessons from the past are discounted on the grounds that they are old. They are from a previous time. They are ancient. We are told that these puritanical notions are fit for a less technological, less enlightened, and less progressive age. Those conventions might have been fine for your bigoted, homophobic grandparents, but this is the 21st Century. Get with the times!

Even the Constitution and the worldview of the Founders gets rewritten and reinterpreted to fit our modern era. So much has changed, we are told, that we need a new government, new conventions, and new constitutions and laws to govern this new era.

I don't buy it. I don't buy any of it.

The average high school graduates of today, though

they live in the "information age," have less understanding of history than any previous generation. They can't imagine a world without smart phones. They think Twitter messages are unbearably long. They communicate with symbols rather than sentences. They have no idea what is going on in their county, let alone across the country. Our generation lacks historical perspective. Why? Chronological snobbery.

This generation does not think that anything spoken, written, or thought before the dawn of YouTube has anything of value for them. And so, we are rushing headlong toward destruction, not because we are excited about the future, but because we are ignorant of the past.

Heaven Is For Real - All Over Again!

4/4/2014

By the time you read this, the movie version of *Heaven Is For Real* will be playing in theaters. Judging from the trailer (which is all that is available to me as I write this), the film looks well-acted, well-filmed, and follows closely the "revelations" of the book. It looks as if some details surrounding the writing of the book are also included in the film. One thing I could not tell is if the film is actually "filmed on location." Now, THAT would be something!

I am certain that this film is going to garner a lot of attention, and I would not be surprised if it ends up making a LOT of money at the box office.

Should you see it? That is up to you. Personally, I won't be giving it any of my money until I can rent it from a Redbox for only \$1. I will eventually watch the film for the same reason I read the book--so I can answer the Christian who asks me what I make of this tale. And that's all it is--a tale.

If you haven't read the critical theological review of the book, I would encourage you to do that.² The book is filled with details that contradict Scripture and contradict themselves, appeals to a Christian culture that values subjective experience over objective revelation, and appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect. The movie is likely to follow suit.

If someone who has seen the movie and loves it asks me, "Have you seen the movie? What did you think?" I am going to respond with a series of questions:

- I haven't seen the movie, but can you tell me what you learned about Heaven from the movie that you can't learn from Scripture?³
- If you need to know these things, and Scripture

2 <http://www.kootenaichurch.org/resource-library>

3 If you read the book you will know that there are a host of claims made about Heaven that find NO support whatsoever in the pages of Scripture.

has not revealed them, then what does that say about Scripture?⁴

- If you don't need to know these things because God has not revealed them, and Burpo claims you do, then what does that say about Burpo?

- Is there any way that you can objectively test those things which are not revealed in Scripture? Can you, or Burpo, prove that they are true? Or do you just have to take his word for it?

- If some things that Burpo says directly contradict what Scripture reveals, should you trust him at all? Should you really believe that he has been to the real Heaven if what he says disagrees with the Bible?

- Which do you think is more reliable: inspired, inerrant Scripture and the words of Jesus? or the testimony of a 4-year-old boy?

Use the opportunity of this film to point people away from its error and to the truth. People will be talking about it. Be prepared to share that *Heaven Is For Real* is not about the real Heaven. And don't be shocked if the gospel is as absent from the movie as it is from the book.

We Are Unworthy Servants

4/25/2014

The more we progress in sanctification, the more we realize how *unsanctified* we really are. This is one of the conundrums of the Christian walk. When we first get saved, we are aware of our sin, but it seems that we really don't understand even the half of it. The closer we draw to Christ, the more we realize how far short we fall. The more we mortify our sin, the more of it we see in ourselves. This should not discourage us! I believe it is a grace of God to hide some of our sinfulness from us for a time and to bring us into deeper and deeper understandings of our own need for Him. Can you imagine how overwhelming it would be if you saw ALL of your sinfulness and nature for what it really is at the first moment of salvation?

I ran across a quote from John Owen that describes this very thing:

But he who has communion with Christ, when he is highest in duties of sanctification and holiness, is clearest in the apprehension of his own unprofitableness, and rejects every thought that might arise in his heart of setting his peace in them, or upon them. He says to his soul, 'Do these things seem something to thee? Alas! Thou hast to do with an infinitely righteous God, who looks through and

4 It says that Scripture is insufficient or in error.

'through all that vanity, which thou art but little acquainted withal; and should He deal with thee according to thy best works, thou must perish.'

Gulp! But isn't it true? If God were to deal with us on the basis of only our BEST works, we would perish before Him. Sobering words.

Life From Non-Life?

5/9/2014

On May 8, 2014, FoxNews.com carried a headline on their front page that read, "Scientists create life form with artificial genetic code." The article headline reads, "Scientists create first living organism containing artificial DNA."⁵

At first glance, the casual scanner of headlines might conclude that scientists had actually created a life form using artificial DNA as the building blocks of that life form. The details tell a different story.

According to the article, "In a report published Wednesday in *Nature*, the scientists said they created two additions to the normal genetic code, and then prompted bacteria to incorporate these pieces of man-made DNA with few ill effects." So what they actually did was to take an ALREADY LIVING CELL and inserted man-made DNA into it. The cells then incorporated that DNA with "few ill effects."

So, they did not CREATE a living organism using artificial DNA. They injected ***already existing*** DNA into an ***already living*** organism, which was not immediately rejected. They tweaked the DNA of an already living organism.

There is a world of difference between creating an organism out of artificial DNA and injecting artificial DNA into an already-living organism. One involves creating life from nonliving things. The second involves altering an already living thing.

This would be like me cutting the leg off my dog and then claiming that I created a three-legged dog "with few ill effects." I didn't actually create anything. I just altered an already existing life form.

So what does this scientific discovery prove?

1. It proves that intelligence is necessary to write DNA code. The scientists did not just randomly combine a bunch of proteins and randomly inject them into cells. They would never do this because they know that random chance cannot create life. Such a random alteration would have immediately destroyed life. Random chance and natural processes do not create structured information. DNA is structured information. They know that an unguided process

5 <http://www.foxnews.com/health/2014/05/08/scientists-create-organism-using-artificial-dna/>

like that would DESTROY life and could never enhance it.

Don't miss the irony. Scientists who believe that this DNA code came into being, writing itself, without any intelligence, sat down to intelligently write DNA code to inject into a living being. The very fact that they had to create the DNA shows that DNA does not create itself. This is apparently lost on the "best and brightest."

Second, it proves that life cannot come from non-life. They still have not produced a living organism out of non-living matter. Even if they eventually do produce it--and I have no reason to think they will--it will only show that *intelligence is necessary to produce life!*

Third, it proves that DNA is a highly specific, highly detailed information system that we--with all our intelligence, learning, and technology--have not even begun to figure out. Yet atheists and evolutionists blindly believe that highly detailed information code, which takes intelligence to understand and attempt to duplicate, has slowly evolved over millions of years without a hint of intelligence.

That is what we call "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" (**Rom. 1:18**). THE FOOL HAS SAID IN HIS HEART, "THERE IS NO GOD" (**Psalm 14:1**).

Heaven Is For Real Update

7/23/2014

Well the movie hit the theaters and came out on DVD yesterday (July 22). I still haven't seen it. According to <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> the movie's opening weekend grossed \$22.5 million. So far the movie has made \$91 million. Though that is not quite in the "blockbuster" category, it fared pretty well.

If the junk mail we receive at the church office is any indication, the movie is set to make it to a big screen in a church near you this weekend. For a small fee, we could use video clips of the movie for sermon fodder. Undoubtedly, there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of churches across the country doing the "Heaven Is For Real" sermon series in the next few weeks.⁶ One website associated with the movie has four downloadable sermons available to free up more time in the pastor's busy schedule for golf.⁷

I found a Lutheran church, a Methodist Church, and a Vineyard church, all on the first page of Google results, who will begin their sermon series this Sunday. Who says unity isn't possible? Apparently nothing can unite the "body of Christ" like false doctrine and the testimony of a four-year-old.

Why do I bring this up again?

6 Google "Heaven Is For Real sermon series" and you will see what I am talking about.

7 <http://www.heavenisforrealmovieresources.com/forchurches>

First, because it is pathetic.

Second, it is an example of the pursuit of “relevance” that I wrote about at the beginning of this article.

Third, to remind you that none of the problems with the book, including its theology, its lack of gospel content, and its contradictions to Scripture, disappear simply because it has become the text for a sermon series.

What are we to say about an “evangelical church” that thinks the testimony of Colton Burpo is more reliable and interesting than the text of Scripture? Again, pathetic.

Without Wax -

