

Reclaiming the Point Part 5

Rationalism

The world is smaller today than it used to be. Unprecedented access to information about events happening near and far, combined with the fact that what gets reported are those calamitous and shocking things that grab our attention, may sometimes make us feel like the whole world is turning upside down. At this moment wildfires are ripping through the northwest United States. A “once in a lifetime” hit the gulf coast and then another one hit in Florida and there’s another “once in a lifetime” hurricane quick on the heels of the last one. Bangladesh has flooded, killing thousands. And that is not to mention the environmental and political global crises of the present moment. It is almost no surprise that plenty of people think these are signs of the times. The world is ending, just like the Bible described it: with earthquakes and fires and storms and the clash of empires. It is a bit more surprising, and far more disappointing, that some of these people think all of these catastrophes are the result of “the gays” and whatever other black sheep they can construct.

Our world may be convulsing, but it is not the result of a superstitious and ill-informed Armageddon on our horizon. In an important respect, calm and cool and rational thinking about the nature of the problems we’re dealing with—their causes and possible solutions—is the best thing for us. This is not to say that the thought hasn’t crossed my mind that maybe God is just fed up with this world. It is to say that such a thought is a temptation and a distraction from the actual problems that confront us.

In the 19th century the Restoration Movement was primarily a rural phenomena that took root in the American frontier. Although, as I have previously discussed, it was fueled by a kind of anti-intellectualism aimed at wresting away control of the Bible from academic and ecclesiastical elites, it also empowered every day, largely undereducated people to read the Bible and live out its teachings by insisting that all of humanity with a basic sound mind could understand the Bible through simple, rational reading. It also sought to confront what it viewed as false and insincere piety that derived from irrational and superstitious readings of the Bible.

Now, after all the inevitable cultural shifts and changes that 150 years brings, we still see echoes of that fundamental rational value in our churches. We can see it in the way we structure leadership and authority in our churches. We can see it in the music we sing. We can see it even in the style of music we sing—although that has shifted in the last several decades (which is the topic of the next installment). We see it, in fact, all over our central ritual of Sunday morning worship. The austere setting (relative to other churches) of our worship space, the emphasis on the reading of the Bible and preaching and de-emphasis on the Lord’s Supper, the lack of instrumental accompaniment; all of these factors and more are products of rational readings of the Bible and thinking on religion that originally sought to resist false, artificial, or superstitious religion.

In many ways, however, we have lost sight of this guiding value. We have turned practices intended to resist mythical and artificial worship and created an artificial mythology around them. We sometimes become prey to the notion that we do things a certain way because God told us to do it this way rather than the truth, which is that we

tried to do the kinds of things that seemed to be in line with the logic of God's Word. There is a subtle difference here, but a difference nonetheless; and one with major practical and spiritual consequences.

Institutional religion is on the decline, and one of the principal reasons that major research groups point to, is because the church is no longer intellectually (and I would argue existentially or spiritually) trustworthy.¹ We have a reputation of a kind of spiritual salesmanship—marketing a product (salvation, community, prosperity, secret truth, etc.) that we can't guarantee, with ulterior motives and a thinly veiled sense of self-importance. That is harsh, but worth considering. All religion deals with the transcendent; those aspects of a broader reality that we struggle to discern and touch, but which we are sure of nonetheless. So there will always be a level of religious practice that may come across as superstitious or mythological. Yet without some fundamental grounding in the God-given grace of intellect and ability to see truth—even if it is darkly, as a reflection in a mirror (1 Cor. 13:12)—we will easily slip into a false, destructive religion that is nothing more than a projection of our own insecurities and brokenness.

I tend to agree with people who suggest that the Enlightenment and the hyper rationalism that came with it, is long past its zenith. We live in a world where people are no longer convinced by the promises that a purely rational world (which is its own fiction) promised. We have in large part seen that reason, at least any individual or group can develop and apply it, also has its limits. There are aspects of our reality that are beyond our ability to grasp or understand. Anyone who is interested in truth must therefore somehow open themselves to the many non-rational parts of human life. Religion is a necessity for truth.

But within the practice of religion we are rightly skeptical of lies, falsehoods, half-truths, and artificial “experiences” of the divine. As a youth minister I helped plan and facilitate church camps during the summers. We used to call Thursdays “cry night” because by that time in the week kids were at their emotional limits. And we were always careful not to prey on their emotions or create artificial “religious experiences.” This was not because we did not want them to find some connection with their inner lives, or because we had some suspicion of the Holy Spirit or Pentecostals. It is because we wanted to do everything we could to ensure that whatever they experienced was authentic.

In our churches today we have that same obligation. It is easy and formulaic to create “praise and worship” music that inspires people, or to latch on to identifiable techniques and strategies for growing churches. What we are after, however, is not a false sense of connection with God nor filling out our church rosters. We are interested in God, in truth, in living out in our lives what we know to be true in our heads. The church still needs to reclaim its rational, honest witness and search for God.

¹ See the important statistical data and explanation by Barna Group's CEO David Kinnamon in his book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*.