



Southwestern

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY



Christian Higher Education
in the Baptist Tradition





Southwestern

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY



Christian Higher Education
in the Baptist Tradition

Spring 2020 Issue
Vol. 62 No. 2

BAPTISTS AND SECULARISM: Forthcoming Challenges for Christian Higher Education

Hunter Baker*

While postmodernism is often considered a monster under the bed for both evangelical Christians and conservatives, I had viewed it as potentially positive and was even hopeful about its impact. After reading Stanley Grenz's *A Primer on Postmodernism*, it seemed postmodernism's idea of a "tournament of narratives" would deprivilege secular, enlightenment views, while simultaneously offering Christians a more equal position in the competition.¹ As a Christian motivated by Paul's appeal to the men of Athens (Acts 17) as well as Leslie Newbiggin's appeal that Christians should embody "a proper confidence,"² I was optimistic about the church participating in such a tournament of truth.

I was naïve.

Although postmodernism can be a leveler of the playing field between worldviews, the worldview reduces its arguments to a single currency: power. And it is with this currency of power that control over American educational institutions is bought, monopolized, and leveraged to manufacture one's view of reality.

For the last 60 years, American Christians have increasingly lost their erstwhile social currency of influence.³

Our debt spiral did not originate from a lack of reasonableness, but

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

² Leslie Newbiggin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

³ James Davison Hunter describes the amazing lack of influence Christians have had relative to small, minority groups such as Jews and homosexuals in the culture of the last several decades. See *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

*Hunter Baker serves as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, as well as university fellow and associate professor of political science, at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. Portions of this article have been adapted from a presentation given to the Research Institute of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

from a rejection of ethics. When I wrote *The End of Secularism*, I aimed to rebut the idea that secularism in politics is more virtuous than religious influence. As the secular argument goes, religious claims are inaccessible to the public, thus society must adhere to our common (and apparently irreligious) reason in the interest of promoting social harmony. Further, by discarding religious views from public discourse, social thought would also be free to embrace scientific progress. My goal was to demonstrate that arguments in favor of secularism were not as strong or satisfactory as one might suppose. The reason lies in the real danger to social harmony. The true threat is not religious argumentation, but the use of political power to compel a conclusion on controversial questions.

Leaving God out of the equation does not unite society; rather, it privileges the discourse of one group over another. For instance, when a religious public policy effort advocated a tax increase to promote tax fairness, secular liberal fellows were still perturbed, despite their common stance on the question of taxes. Moreover, the Christian often appreciates the power and benefit of scientific inquiry and discovery along with the secularist; the conflict is not over science but the moral and philosophical tenets inherent within the secularist worldview (i.e. differences over abortion, stem-cell research, the theory of evolution, etc.). The “war” between religion and science is more propaganda than substance.⁴ And the propaganda is necessary if secularism is to maintain its currency of power.

Secularization may not be a fully accomplished fact in the United States; it is certainly less powerful here than in Western Europe. But it has gained control of the dominant institutions of American life. Believers live in a world that regards religious belief as either irrelevant or irrational. As a result, they learn to compartmentalize their private beliefs. This process of privatization and compartmentalization has increasingly caused the existence of religious faith in nearly every public activity to appear unusual, perplexing, and even bizarre.

The parallel track to social power is cultural development, and here Christians have also found themselves on the losing side. The sexual revolution inaugurated by the birth control pill brought a sea change in social mores. Marriage has declined as a major social institution, especially in its permanence. So, too, has the predominance of sex as a phenomenon that occurs within marriage. While these changes have isolated Christians

⁴ All of these arguments may be reviewed in Hunter Baker, *The End of Secularism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

(especially those thinking, speaking, and living in an integrated way), they have merely marked them as eccentric or perhaps suffering from sexual “hang ups.” Within that frame, Christians end up fighting against mandatory sex education for students in public schools or battling to make divorce more difficult so that families might stay together. Some have tried to caricature the pro-life movement as little more than a fig leaf disguising the intent to suppress women, but given the movement’s emphasis on the civil rights of the unborn, that argument is unconvincing. We may appear recalcitrant or puritanical to the secular world but hopefully not evil.

The same cannot be said for the debate over same-sex marriage. A critical development occurred in the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Kennedy, writing for the court, employed rational basis scrutiny in overturning the Texas law against sodomy.⁵ In other cases involving classes such as women or people of a particular race, the court has employed a heightened level of scrutiny (whether “strict” or perhaps intermediate). In a heightened level of scrutiny, the court will not be deferential to claims made by a state government, for example, because the court believes it is reasonable to adapt a skeptical stance given historical or cultural conditions. Rational basis scrutiny, on the other hand, generally means the court will defer to government defendants. As long as a law is substantiated by a rationale, the court will accept that reasoning and rule in its favor. This ensures that the court does not argue policy with legislatures, which would be beyond its purview.

The decision against a sodomy bill using only rational basis scrutiny was significant, for it signified that the Christian sexual ethic⁶ was headed for an ultimate collision with the American legal establishment. This is a rational basis scrutiny “with bite,” as one legal scholar has put it, and it overcomes deference to legislatures only by attaching the judgment of animus.⁷ In other words, the governing assumption posits that laws against homosexual sex or same-sex marriage exist solely because of irrational hatred or discrimination. According to the court’s application of rational basis scrutiny, the law expresses animosity.

This posture was only magnified in *Obergefell*, a decision that was

⁵ 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

⁶ Defined here as the belief that sex is only for marriage and marriage is only something that happens between a man and a woman.

⁷ Kenji Yoshino, “Why the Court Can Strike Down Marriage Restrictions Under Rational Basis Review,” <http://www.scotusblog.com/2011/08/why-the-court-can-strike-down-marriage-restrictions-under-rational-basis-review/>.

akin to an asteroid hitting the planet. Aristotle viewed the male-female reproductive pairing as the fundamental unit of society—not the individual—because society has no future existence without them.⁸ To the extent that we have a history to examine, there is no evidence of anything like same-sex marriage prior to the most recent period. Chief Justice John Roberts referred to this reality in his *Obergefell* dissent when he asked, “Who do we think we are?”⁹ Despite these precedents, the court ruled as it did. The result is that the Christian view has been officially relegated to the category of prejudice, hatred, and bigotry.

Were same-sex marriage to have the same impact as that of the sexual revolution, the consequences may have been no different than what Christians have already seen and experienced: accusations of repression and eccentricity.¹⁰ But gay marriage has brought us to the intersection of the new view of sex and marriage as well as the logic of civil rights. The Christian sexual ethic clashes with the new American legal principles regarding non-discrimination of homosexuality and transgenderism.

In the case of *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, Justice Kennedy expressed his surprise and disapproval that the Colorado commission treated Jack Phillips like a Nazi or a southern racist,¹¹ yet he failed to acknowledge the role of his own jurisprudence in Phillips’s mistreatment. For, if the court sees no rational basis for traditional sexual morality in law, then why should a state commission assume anything other than animus in the mind of Phillips as he refuses to create and design a cake for a same-sex wedding?

My purpose in describing this situation in detail is to illustrate the dynamic that has replaced principled arguments about secularism. The debate over secularism had to do with the question of whether removing religion from the public sphere resulted in a society that is more harmonious, fair, and rational. Once it became obvious that secularism cannot be ethically or politically neutral, but rather reflects a partisan position, the argument evolved to a more aggressive expression. I am convinced that the combination of same-sex marriage with the logic of civil rights is the ultimate wedge issue, a kind of secularism on steroids. This ideology labels itself as kindness, inclusion, and intelligence arrayed against the

⁸ Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book I, Section ii. “Those who are incapable of existing without the other must be united as a pair.”

⁹ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. (2015).

¹⁰ I am indebted to Andrew Walker for his discussion of the “freakishness” of Christian sexual ethics in a chapel presentation at Union University.

¹¹ *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. (2018).

purported bigotry, superstition, and irrationality of traditional Christians.

What of the consequences? What must we confront as Christians in an age of secularism? First, we can look to the non-profit sector. In addition to building and sustaining churches, Christians have invested human and financial resources in fields such as education, adoption, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, public policy, counseling, and addiction recovery. Where these institutions and projects intersect with government, churches and non-profit ministries may find themselves in a precarious position. Unless they conform to culturally dominant views regarding sex, marriage, and family, these organizations may be either unable to continue operating or compelled to work with reduced resources.

At first blush, this may seem to have a simple solution: separate all ministries and Christian organizations from government funding. But reality is far more complex. Christian colleges, for example, have participated in good faith with their peers as recipients of aid for their students. Those funds—whether loans, grants, or other aid—constitute the majority of revenue at most schools. To eliminate existing government-based financial aid programs would likely mean the closure of nearly all schools receiving funds. The Christian philanthropic community would have to make hard choices about saving a reduced number of institutions. Under such a scenario, many students would not be able to access Christian higher education.¹²

But let us suspend the question of money and consider another concern. Non-profits generally need the state's permission to operate. Further, they often need formal accreditation from secular organizations. It is then possible that even a well-funded, private Christian college would not be permitted to continue offering programs in fields such as education, social work, psychology, nursing, and even law and business. Within such a state of affairs, even wealthy Christian universities could still fail as pariahs. Given the heavy investments these institutions represent, pressure to conform could be extraordinary.

These considerations combine to form a central concern: that, in the wake of *Obergefell*, a blend of civil rights laws, professional ethics, and accreditation standards can be leveraged to secularize the entire non-profit sector. Even if religious liberty protections were to thwart some attacks,

¹² Without going through a similar analysis, I note that the question of non-profit tax status is similarly consequential for the finances of Christian organizations.

recent history confirms that even these legal provisions would not stop all of them. It is not unreasonable to believe we are on the cusp of such a cultural shift. Barring a major change in our cultural ethos, a ratchet effect of secularizing higher education would likely be irreversible. Given the religious history and traditions of the non-profit sector in the United States, such a shift would be nothing less than a massive transformation, an aggressive privatization of religion, and all for the sake of a recently formed secular, social orthodoxy.

The election of Donald Trump did not stop the impact or fragment its effect. It did, however, slow down its progress. A Trump-era Department of Education or Justice has not made administrative decisions that would cripple Christian higher education, for example. Yet, we do not know with certainty what will happen next, either in his administration or subsequent presidencies.

This uncertain future leads me to encourage younger Christians to demonstrate solidarity with the church and Christian organizations concerning liberty. Thus far, the results have been rather alarming. Recall the number of young Christians who supported a counterstatement that denounced the Nashville Statement (a classic, orthodox, and clear explanation of Christian sexuality) as “a declaration of bigotry.” Many of them reflect the ethos of their day and reinforce the impact of law upon public attitudes. We must not underrate it. Generally speaking, Americans take moral cues from the law. Both *Roe v. Wade* and the Civil Rights Act changed public attitudes toward abortion and segregation, respectively. *Obergefell* has put Christian orthodoxy on the wrong side of the law. It teaches that we are outlaws, an out-of-step minority. It would not be overly bleak to hope that perhaps a quarter to a third of Americans may persevere with a biblical position on the same-sex marriage question.

Yet even that fraction will be significantly smaller should we confine it to younger Christians. Increasingly, they will be taught by the culture in this matter. My own children are teenagers. We sat and watched the finale of *Adventure Time*, a Cartoon Network show we have followed for many years. One of the final scenes featured two female protagonists realizing their love for each other during a battle and kissing passionately after one saved the other. The new understanding has already penetrated many children’s programs (including Disney Channel productions) and will be fully promoted in schools.

Describing 19th century America, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

The majority thus has in the United States an immense power in fact and a power of opinion almost as great; and once a majority has formed on a question, there are virtually no obstacles which can, never mind stop, but even slow down its march and allow it time to listen to the complaints of those it crushes in passing.¹³

Tocqueville was indeed an astute observer. Short of a movement of God, one can hardly conceive a reversal of the sexual revolution within our lifetimes. And this machine of the majority will be driven by those who are ready to crush any who stand in the way. Most of this majority will be indifferent to the pleas of those they consider to be retrograde, recalcitrant, unenlightened, and prejudiced. They will accept the explanation that religious liberty is merely code for discrimination, a refuge for scoundrels.¹⁴

Today's Baptist students face a far stricter test than my own generation did in their youth. When they uphold a Christian sexual ethic, they will not be simply "out of step" with the dominant culture. Rather, they will risk being regarded as the moral equivalent of a racist. And should they express their beliefs openly, they will likely find themselves isolated and with reduced career and social opportunities. Given their circumstances, I am not surprised that some affirmed a counterstatement to a declaration on biblical sexuality, even when they could not articulate a substantive rationale for their views. They are looking for a middle ground, a way to be faithful and yet still be viable in this culture.

What our students face individually, Christian higher education will face corporately. We will be tempted to err on the side of preserving institutions and organizations and compromise our orthodoxy. Our brothers and sisters in places along the West Coast and in the Northeast will face these choices sooner than the rest of us. Many will want to maintain peace at any price (which, as Augustine reminds us, is not peace at all), to revise and re-characterize until we reach a *modus vivendi* that works in the modern age.

¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, Part Two, chapter 7.

¹⁴ Just to reinforce the sense of intent, I reference the ultra-wealthy Tim Gill's desire to "punish the wicked" on homosexual rights, which means ordinary, orthodox Christians who hope for religious liberty. Andy Kroll, "Meet the Megadonor behind the LGBTQ Rights Movement," <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/meet-the-megadonor-behind-the-lgbtq-rights-movement-193996/>.

This dilemma evokes Bonhoeffer's concept of cheap grace. A church that promotes cheap grace provides "a cheap covering" for the world's sins: "no contrition is required." Cheap grace denies "the living Word of God." The Christian content with cheap grace is happy to live like the rest of the world.¹⁵ In contrast, Bonhoeffer describes costly grace, the "treasure hidden in the field" and "the kingly rule of Christ." Costly grace issues commands that result in action from the one who receives them. But it is always in danger of being ignored and forgotten if one is turned toward the world and not God.¹⁶ Will we receive the commands of costly grace?

Bonhoeffer claims the monastic vision of the Catholic Church was an attempt to preserve a place for costly grace. He also takes note of Luther coming to grips with costly grace that "shattered his whole existence."¹⁷ We might also think of the Reformation and even the efforts made in the twentieth century to press the cause of vital evangelicalism against a mainline Christianity that was ready to merge with the world like a raindrop entering an ocean. This "Christ of Culture," to use Reinhold Niebuhr's phrase, stands ready to bless the *culture's progress* on the *culture's terms* almost as a matter of course.¹⁸ Such a version will be at least ceremonially useful and will generally enjoy a good reputation. The "Christ of Culture" pastor can serve an inoffensive function. He or she may officiate a wedding, administer a baptism, or perform a funeral, all as cultural rites.¹⁹ Cheap grace moves us in that direction if we do not counter it with costly grace.

One of Bonhoeffer's prophetic statements resonates powerfully in this cultural moment, given how the church and its members interpret their response to current controversies:

If a father sends his child to bed, the boy knows at once what he has to do. But suppose he has picked up a smattering of pseudo-theology. In that case he would argue more or less like this: "Father tells me to go to bed, but he really means that I am tired, and he does not want me to be tired. I can overcome my tiredness just as well if I go out and play. Therefore, though father tells me to go to bed, he really

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 44–45.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 48.

¹⁸ H. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951).

¹⁹ Baker, 146–48. In *The End of Secularism*, I discussed the state pastor as a functionary of the ersatz church we might call the Department of God.

means: ‘Go out and play.’”²⁰

We can deceive ourselves into performing this trick. Our desire to avoid the censure of the new cultural majority will encourage us to do it. To those who look at our cultural position with a degree of despair, as I sometimes am tempted to do, Bonhoeffer realistically concludes that “following Jesus is not something we men can achieve for ourselves.” He quickly adds, “but with God all things are possible.”²¹

We are rapidly approaching an existential crisis both as individuals and as part of the church. Will we choose the modern equivalent of “bourgeois respectability” and its cheap grace, or will we walk the road of costly grace? Certainly, that is part of the special stewardship Americans have in this nation under the dogma of the sovereignty of the people (to borrow from Tocqueville’s terminology).²² We all possess tiny pieces of the American sovereignty that we dare not sit upon like the inert talent of Christ’s parable.²³ So, we will organize and engage in advocacy. We will sometimes even enter the courts. But we also must recognize that the spirit of the age is the spirit of the age. It may be that what Francis Schaeffer identified in culture as the antithesis has become so sharp that the broader American culture will not be able to tolerate us as equal participants in the *res publica*. How shall we then live?²⁴

If the power brokers of what counts as reality exclude us from their public frame except as rogues and villains to be cast as players where useful to the narrative, then we will have to draw back into a church community to blow upon embers or perhaps to plow old ground into fields that may once again put forth green shoots. We may be regulated out of the adoption business, the pregnancy center business, the formal education business, and more. But we will not abandon the church. We will be forced to return to the first things of faith and to achieve a greater emphasis on sanctification, the absence of which will make engagement with a hostile and dismissive culture null and void.

Sunday School may be the only school we will be able to run. And we will have to make it count. No trivial Sundays. No trivial hours.

²⁰ Baker, *The End of Secularism*, 81.

²¹ Baker, *The End of Secularism*, 85.

²² Tocqueville, vol. 1, Part One, chapter 5.

²³ Matt 25:14-30.

²⁴ I believe this is what Rod Dreher is getting at with his Benedict Option. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).