

# Above All Earthly Pow'rs

*Christ in a Postmodern World*



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## *Preface*



I am most appreciative to the Trustees of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for their continued support of the sabbatical program for faculty. Without a sustained period away from everyday responsibilities, it would be quite difficult to do serious research and thinking. So it was that this particular book began with a half-sabbatical.

Before this book saw the light of day, it was my privilege to present some of its substance in other parts of the world. In fact, while it was just in an infant stage I gave two lectures from its material at the Jonathan Edwards Institute in Maryland in 2002 and in 2004. In 2004, I also traveled to Australia and was the guest of the three theological colleges in Sydney: Moore Theological College, Sydney Missionary and Bible College, and the Presbyterian Centre. My subject in each was “Christ in the Postmodern World.” During this same visit, I traveled to New Zealand to give three plenary addresses at the World Evangelical Congregational Fellowship. My subject was “The Uniqueness of Christ,” and I drew off some of the material in this book. Finally, it was my privilege to give the Kistemaker Academic Lectures at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, in 2005. There I explored some of the themes of current spirituality which are mentioned in this book as well as their consequences for the Church today.

An author’s debts are always very large and most of them quite impossible to acknowledge. Sometimes the reading of a book mostly

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unrelated to one's current focus is what starts a stream of thought that ends up moving the project forward unexpectedly. These are the delightful experiences that one remembers long afterward. They are, of course, sometimes matched by surprises of a different kind, for at other times one can read assiduously in places that seem the most promising only to end up empty-handed! I think it will be clear in the pages which follow which books I have been able to mine most effectively, whose authors have become a fraternity of discourse without whose thought these pages would have been a lot emptier.

Some of one's debts, however, are not as obvious as this, and they come more from the example of others and of how they have done their work. It is to a rich circle of friends whose work I know, from whom I have profited in so many ways, that I do, indeed, owe a great debt of gratitude. It would be impossible to name them all, but some stand out especially: John Stott, whose home I shared for some years and whose doctrinal fidelity and clarity of expression have always been an example to me; Jim Packer, whom I first heard speak when I was a theological student in London many years ago and with whom I subsequently worked on several projects, who exemplifies both theological brilliance and deep piety as part and parcel of each other; Carl Henry, who regularly visited the institution in which I taught and whom I remember for the way in which he put his considerable theological acumen to work in leading the evangelical world to a more authentic expression of its belief; Francis Schaeffer, with whom my wife and I worked for a time at L'Abri, Switzerland, and who, for me at least, was a pioneer in thinking about the Christian engagement with contemporary culture; Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose extraordinary expositions I heard weekly over a period of years and whose vision of the greatness and grandeur of God have left a lasting impression on me; Os Guinness, with whom I sat in the same courses in preparation for the dreaded final examinations for the University of London B.D. and whose work in applying the insights of sociology to the issues evangelicalism faces has been so helpful; George Marsden and Mark Noll, historians both and historians of a very high order, with whom for a period of time I taught in the same institution and from whose skill in showing the context of ideas I learned a lot; and finally my own faculty colleagues who have provided what I sus-

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pect is a rarity in academia, a fraternity of common interests and uncommon stimulation.

Parts of the manuscript were read by Os Guinness, Gary Parrott, and Garth Rosell. I am grateful for their kindness and help in doing this. Needless to say, the responsibility for these pages is mine alone. From those who have heard the small parts of this study which I have delivered, I have received enough encouragement to think that it is, indeed, mining a vein of legitimate concern in the Church, as well as addressing legitimate questions about how to construct a Christian presence in our postmodern world. With this encouragement beneath its wings, this study now takes flight.



## *Introduction*



Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

The weather in Boston was clear, the sky cloudless, the air crisp, the trees showing just the first hint of fall color. That was the day that two jets left Logan International Airport for California but were hijacked and, a short time later, flown into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Thousands of people who thought they were beginning another ordinary day were killed in an extraordinary way. Two other jets were also hijacked that day, one ending up in the side of the Pentagon and the other in a field in Pennsylvania, the latter thanks to brave, bare-handed anti-terrorist action on board. On that day the United States suffered its worst act of terrorism, a ghastly moment of cold, callous, calculated mass murder. It left a gaping hole in the nation's heart and images of chaos and wreckage etched forever in its memory.

In the days that followed, as dazed Americans watched the pictures from the crash scenes, the distractions that make up the noisy surface where we live were stripped away. It is, of course, the rather mundane routines and events of life that give it a sense of daily normalcy. But these were not normal days and much of the surface clutter simply stopped. It suddenly seemed indecent, inappropriate, in light of this stark, unrelieved tragedy.

Television cleansed itself of its incessant barrage of commercials

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and, for a few days, offered uninterrupted coverage of the unfolding events. And how could we ponder this appalling loss and, at the same time, sit back to watch the Miss America beauty pageant or the Emmy Awards? They were canceled. The late-night comedians fled the air. Hollywood studios were quick to finger this pulse and revisited their decisions regarding what movies would be released in the fall. While the nation paused, trying to comprehend this tragedy and the reasons behind it, radio stations thought it might be wise to do a little self-censoring, so some songs were dropped from the roster, like Metallica's "Seek and Destroy," Soundgarden's "Blow Up the Outside World," and the Stone Temple Pilots' "Dead and Bloated." Even the usual bickering and destructiveness of the political process, driven by the competition for power and ever feasting on the nation's social divisions, stopped overnight. National purpose now loomed over these squabbles. It suddenly — and unusually — seemed to be a bigger thing than narrow, partisan interest. Indeed, the politicians seemed almost to have been shamed into attending to matters of national concern.

At all the crash scenes, but especially in New York, onlookers gazed in sad awe at the smoking wreckage, buildings and planes twisted into grotesque shapes and hiding within them the crushed bodies of those taken down. The nation's attention was simultaneously riveted on the heroic actions of those who worked with such determination, and amidst such tiredness, to find any who might still be alive. Here, too, was another telling juxtaposition: the terrorists' dark hatred and the remarkable bravery and fortitude of those who continued to dig for the lost. Many years before, President John Adams, after having suffered a number of personal losses in his life, and with a war raging in Russia where his son was at the time, wrote to his friend Benjamin Rush to say that "war necessarily brings with it some virtues, and great and heroic virtues, too," though he added that it would be nice if those virtues did not have to await a tragedy before becoming so obvious.<sup>1</sup> They were certainly obvious in the days and months that followed the September 11 attack.

At the Pentagon, near the jagged hole in the side of the building, rescue workers unfurled a huge American flag and draped it down the

1. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 609.

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side of the building, a symbol of the nation's solidarity and of its refusal to yield before the evil which had been visited on it. And throughout America, in a gesture of pride and unity, the flag was likewise hung by front doors, on mailboxes, on car antennae, in shop windows, and from overpasses. As is often the case in America, however, this quickly turned to excess as merchants seized the moment to produce pins and other items with the image of the flag, and television commercials likewise exploited the tragedy and the surge in patriotic fervor which followed it, and even the government produced its budget wrapped in covers of Old Glory. Yet the surge of unashamed patriotism, and the sadness, undergirded America's new business, which was to find and destroy the networks in the world whose business was to terrorize. The country was now put on a war footing.

Something else that was unusual seemed to happen overnight, too. The word *Evil* returned to people's vocabulary. In a culture strongly influenced by postmodern thought, of course, Evil is conceptually absent. Indeed, prior to this event, the moral majority in America was made up of those who do not believe in moral absolutes. In the absence of enduring standards of right and wrong, in all places and times, we are, unfortunately, stripped of our ability to speak of Good and Evil. Good and Evil contract. In the absence of absolutes, these words go no deeper than our feelings about our personal circumstances, be they pleasant or unpleasant, satisfactory or boring. And what is good for one may not be good for another. But how could Americans, or anyone else, speak of this appalling attack without recourse to a language about Evil which goes far beyond saying what they simply disliked? In view of the carnage that had been wrought, there was a deep need to speak of what is enduringly, eternally wrong. This, however, turned out to be no easy matter because the postmodern conceptual cloud cover had not been dispersed. If the word *Evil* peppered talk about these events, it was also the case that the great majority in America had no framework in which Evil had its place.

In fact, one of the casualties of September 11 appears to have been God himself. Before the terrorist attacks, 72% of Americans affirmed their belief that God is omnipotent and in control of the world, but afterwards that figure dropped to 68%. And just before the attacks occurred, 38% affirmed their belief in moral absolutes which are true for

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all times and places and not determined by circumstance, but in the days immediately following the attack only 22% were willing to affirm that.<sup>2</sup> The language of evil had become a verbal necessity after September 11, but it remained a cultural and conceptual difficulty. That this was the case was all too evident a year later when signs were popping up all over the cultural landscape suggesting that outrage over the attack was out of order. For example, the National Education Association advised teachers to offer no value judgments to their students on the occasion of the anniversary of the attacks, and the bishops of the United Methodist Church declared that all violence fell into the same moral category, thereby making no distinction between those who used violence to attack and those who used it in self-defense. Without moral absolutes, the business of making moral judgments becomes impossible, although few seemed to see the anomaly that was at work: that those who take the position that judgments should not be rendered on behavior are, often unbeknownst to themselves, also taking a moral position.

This event which was so unexpected, so terrible, and so psychologically intrusive brought into clearer focus a number of other issues. Three of them are particularly germane to this study. First of all, there is the fact that for all of the talk about how America changed after this event there remains an uneasy sense that American culture is actually little different after the event from what it was before — that it still is morally and spiritually adrift and in this it is no different from the other Western countries. Second, the global ambitions of radical Islam called attention to the many Muslims in the West and this, in turn, was a reminder of the West's growing ethnic and religious complexity. To this America is no exception for, in a short period of time, it has become the world's most religiously diverse nation. Third, this moment of tragedy and evil shone its own light on the Church and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual *gravitas*, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore.

2. George Barna, "How America's Faith Has Changed Since 9-11," <http://www.barna.org>.

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### **The Front Lines**

These three issues do, of course, have their connections. The first two, I believe, are the major defining cultural realities with which the Church must now intentionally engage: first, the disintegration of the Enlightenment world and its replacement by the postmodern ethos and, second, the fact that through the changed immigration law of 1965, America has become a truly multiethnic society and perhaps the most religiously diverse one in the world. The exotic religions from faraway places that once only filled pages of *National Geographic* may now be next door. Mosques, landmarks that once seemed confined to the Middle East, can now be seen side by side with churches in America, though much of the practice of Islam is also invisible to most people. America is now home to more Hispanics than African Americans; Arabs are coming close to drawing even with Jews in number; and there are more Muslims than Episcopalians, or Congregationalists, or Eastern Orthodox, or Mormons. The arrival of old, non-Christian religions in America and the emergence of more recent spiritualities that are not religious, and often not institutionalized, are a new circumstance. This means that the relation of Christ to non-Christian religions, as well as to these personally constructed spiritualities, is no longer a matter of theorizing from a safe distance but rather a matter of daily encounter in neighborhoods, in schools, at work, at the gas station, and at the supermarket. And what will prove to be even more momentous in the evangelical world than its engagement with the other religions, I believe, will be whether it is able to distinguish what it has to offer from the emergence of these forms of spirituality. Therapeutic spiritualities which are non-religious begin to look quite like evangelical spirituality which is therapeutic and non-doctrinal.

These two developments — the emergence of the postmodern ethos and the growing religious and spiritual diversity — are by no means parallel or even complementary but they are unmistakably defining American culture in a significantly new way. And they are defining the context within which the Church must live out its life. Already there are some signs that this engagement with culture is not exactly going the Church's way. It was certainly noticeable that following September 11 the Church was mostly unable to offer any public reading on

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the tragedy which did anything more than commiserate with those who had lost loved ones. There was virtually no Christian interpretation, no wrestling with the meaning of Evil, little thought about the Cross where Christians contend its back was broken.

### **Christ and Context**

In 1984, I wrote a traditional christology entitled *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation*. This volume was part of a series in which each of the authors was asked to follow the same format: about one third was to be devoted to the biblical materials, one third to historical developments, and the remaining third to a discussion of three or four contemporary thinkers. This is the sort of foundational work which needs to be done in developing a christology. The questions which such an account seeks to address are almost always those that are *internal* to the Church or to academia. This is entirely appropriate. These issues, such as how the person of Christ is spoken of by the different authors of the New Testament, how these lines of thought were taken up in the early Church, how they were debated, how the Chalcedonian Definition sought to resolve these discussions and what heresies fell outside the boundaries it prescribed, what happened in the Middle Ages and Reformation, and why it is that many modern christologies begin on the premise that Chalcedon must be rejected, are central and necessary considerations in a christology. However, it has become increasingly clear to me that while these internal issues are of vital importance, they are not the only issues that should be engaging the Church. They are the indispensable, foundational questions but they do not comprise everything that the Church should be thinking about with respect to the person of Christ. There are also issues that are *external* in nature which should accompany this foundational work. These are concerned with how a christology faces off against, how it engages, its own cultural context.

Those most self-consciously biblical in their views have often eschewed this work, and their suspicions about it are not entirely unjustified. There is a long trail of contextualized theologies, written over the last half century, in which the external dimension virtually replaces the

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internal, cultural interests eclipse biblical norms, and the result has been the kind of compromise, trendiness, and manipulation which ends up promoting worldly agendas, be they political, social, ideological, or personal, in place of biblical truth. This has been a sorry tale. And somewhere in the making of each of its works the fatal step was taken to allow the culture to say what God's story should sound like rather than insisting that theology is not theology if it is not listening to God telling his own story in his own way. Karl Barth was right to assert that theology "is itself a word, a human response; yet what makes it theology is not its own word or response but the Word which it hears and to which it *responds*. Theology stands or falls with the Word of God, for the Word of God precedes all theological words by creating, arousing, and challenging them."<sup>3</sup> And he goes on to say that if theology wants to be something other than a response to the Word — and I would wish to insist gently that we should understand "Word" as being the *biblical* Word — it will rapidly become empty, futile, and without meaning. There is much in the story of contextualization which proves how futile and empty it became precisely because it did not allow the biblical Word of God to summon it to its task and to judge the results.

That being the case, the volume which I wrote earlier, in 1984, remains foundational to this present volume. The conclusions which I reached then are unchanged today. I ended that volume by saying that "Christ's work was work that only God could do, and that he could only do it in union with flesh that was ours." In Christ, "men and women in all ages and cultures have found that for which [the] deepest impulses of their nature cry out." Not only so, but in him "they have found their Creator and Redeemer." Even more than that, in Christ and through him, we see "the exposition of God's character and ways, the declaration of his love and judgment, the fulfillment of his intention for creation."<sup>4</sup> Nothing has changed in these conclusions nor should anything change in them for they echo the biblical testimony. What has changed is a growing concern on my part to be able to say more exactly how Christ, in whom divine majesty and human frailty are joined in one per-

3. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), 16-17.

4. David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1984), 179.

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A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper he amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and pow'r are great,  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

That word above all earthly pow'rs,  
No thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours  
Thru him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go,  
This mortal life also.  
The body they may kill;  
God's truth abideth still:  
His kingdom is forever.

Martin Luther, *ca.* 1529,  
trans. 1853

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son, is to be heard, and is to be preached, in a postmodern, multiethnic, multireligious society.

If it is the case that contextualized theologies have all too often become a doomed enterprise, the reason, the most self-consciously biblical believe, is that the project itself is unnecessary. And there is something to be said for this argument, too. For it is certainly the case that the Word of God, read or preached, has the power to enter the innermost crevices of a person's being, to shine light in unwanted places, to explode the myths and deceits by which fallen life sustains itself, and to bring that person face to face with the eternal God. It is this biblical Word which God uses to bring repentance, to excite faith, to give new life, to sustain that life once given, to correct, nurture, and guide the

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Church (Jer. 23:29; II Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:12; Jas. 1:18). The biblical Word is self-authenticating under the power of the Holy Spirit. This Word of God is the means by which God accomplishes his saving work in his people, and this is a work that no evangelist and no preacher can do. This is why the dearth of serious, sustained biblical preaching in the Church today is a serious matter. When the Church loses the Word of God it loses the very means by which God does his work. In its absence, therefore, a script is being written, however unwittingly, for the Church's undoing, not in one cataclysmic moment, but in a slow, inexorable slide made up of piece by tiny piece of daily dereliction.

These objections to undertaking this kind of study are not, however, fatal. Indeed, not to proceed would be an unhappy outcome because theology, if it is true to its own nature, must be missiological in its intent.<sup>5</sup> Its task is not only to understand the nature of biblical truth but also to ask how that truth addresses the issues of the day. Churches today, who send out missionaries to other parts of the world, would be considered greatly mistaken if they instructed those missionaries to depend only on the Word of God and not to attempt to understand the people to whom they have been sent to minister. By the same token, evangelical theology should not need to justify any attempt that it makes to understand the context into which it is called to speak. If there is self-justification to be made, it is by those theologians who, as D. M. Baillie observed, "are apt to be deaf to the questionings of the outside world."<sup>6</sup>

5. I have developed the missiological nature of theology in several essays which deal with its methodology: "The Nature and Function of Theology," *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 175-99; "An American Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from *Theoria* to *Praxis*," *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 83-93; "Word and World: Biblical Authority and the Quandary of Modernity," *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 153-76; "The Theologian's Craft," *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 171-94; and "The Theology of Preaching," *God's Living Word: Essays in Preaching*, ed. Theodore Stylianopoulos (Brookline: Holy Cross Press, 1983), 57-70.

6. D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 59.

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In an older but telling novel, *The Ugly American*, the reader early on is introduced to Louis Sears. Sears has been a popular U.S. Senator for eighteen years but loses his bid for reelection. His preference, after this loss, is to receive a judgeship but since there are no openings, he finally settles on becoming the United States' ambassador to the fictional Asian country of Sarkhan. However, he neither learns the language nor the customs of this country. Indeed, he forbids his staff from becoming too involved in Sarkhanese society. The problem which arises, of course, is that he does not know what is happening, since he cannot read the papers, and in Sarkhanese society, etiquette does not allow for translators to pass on bad news to the person for whom they are translating. Furthermore, he cannot communicate American interests to most people since he does not speak their language and they do not understand his.

The haplessness of this situation becomes evident early on when a shipment of rice, carried aboard American ships, and driven inland by American trucks, is presented to the people with smiles by American officials. Unbeknownst to them, however, Communists have stenciled onto each sack the words, "This rice is a gift from Russia." Yet the words are written in Sarkhanese, which none of the Americans there can understand. This ignorance is such a boon to the Soviets, who are attempting to penetrate the country, that their Ambassador sends back a dispatch shortly after this event worrying that the English press, which has become quite critical of the American Ambassador, might succeed in having him recalled. The Soviet Ambassador proposes that a biting critique of Sears appear in the Soviet journal, *Pravda*, as a way of building up his importance in American eyes and thereby preserving his place in Sarkhan!<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, then, we might say that on the one end we have those theologians which have learned Sarkhanese, learned the local culture and habits, but have lost touch with the country whose policies and interests they are supposed to represent as ambassadors. Instead, having cut themselves loose, they have come to see their role as simply representing their own agendas and policies and passing these off as if they were those of the country whose ambassadors they supposedly are. On

7. William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

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the other end, we have those theologies which are self-consciously ambassadorial but which fail to learn the Sarkhanese language and customs. Thus they are hobbled in their ability to communicate both the content of, and the reasons for, their country's policy decisions.

In attempting to complete the work in christology which I began in 1984, I should make it clear, I am writing from the perspective of historic Protestantism. I am also doing so as an observer of and participant in the evangelical world. And I am doing so at the very moment when American culture is undergoing a drastic change in cultural mood, thereby transforming the missionary context in which the Church is living. Modernity itself is in deep crisis, and the postmodern ethos which is sweeping over it is bringing not only some relief to evangelical faith which had been abandoned on the margins by modernity, but also a whole new set of challenges. This crisis is creating a world which is quite different from the world evangelicalism inhabited in the early years following World War II.

And yet, the history of the church shows that in every generation there are cultural challenges, in some places hostility against religion, overt persecution, difficulties of every kind, and yet generation after generation the Church has joyfully proclaimed the greatness of Christ and his humility in assuming our flesh, taking upon him our sin as if it were his own, and in conquering that sin also conquering both its consequence of death and the devil. The looming threats of aggressive religions, of hostile government powers, of tribes and nations bound in their opposition to Christ, are no match for the power of God made known in the gospel. Even in moments of persecution, from dark prisons, this greatness of Christ has still been proclaimed. And so it is here.

The two motifs which are transforming culture — the emergence of the postmodern ethos and the new, growing tidal wave of religious pluralism — are deep and powerful currents that are flowing through the nation. But they are not peculiar to America. In fact, Europe appears to be well ahead of the United States in its experience of postmodernity and it also appears to be caught in more painful perplexity about immigration and its consequences. Yet there is nothing in the modern world that is a match for the power of God and nothing in modern culture which diminishes our understanding of the greatness of Christ. It is from this vantage point that we must now begin our journey.

## INTRODUCTION

It starts, in the first two chapters, in the postmodern world, where we will consider why it is that such hard times have befallen modernity. We will think about the postmodern mood which has followed the crisis in modernity. In the third chapter, I take up the changing patterns in immigration following the rewriting of the law in 1965 and explore the rearranged spiritual landscape which has accompanied these changes. In the three chapters which follow I have attempted to think about the message of Christ from within this postmodern world which I have spent time describing. In these, I take up the theme of spirituality, which really speaks with the soul of postmodernity, and the two ways in which postmodern unbelief is expressing itself in the language of the meaninglessness and decenteredness of life. In these chapters, I am self-consciously ambassadorial, representing the policies and positions of my country, so to speak, but hoping to do so in a way that connects with the preoccupations and mental habits of the Sarkhanese. I then examine, and weigh, the most important large-scale attempt at the churchly level of engaging postmodern culture. It is the new ways of “doing church” among the “seeker sensitive.” I find myself viewing all of this sometimes with a sense of bemusement and sometimes of befuddlement. It has left me wondering if, in these churches, ambassadorial language is being heard or if the practitioners of this new churchly mode have simply decided that they are only going to speak Sarkhanese: Sarkhanese, that is, passing itself off as being ambassadorial.

This is the final volume in a series that began with the publication of *No Place for Truth: or, What Ever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* in 1993. This project was the result of an extremely generous grant from the Pew Foundation for which I am still grateful. It launched me on an undertaking that has lasted a full decade. After *No Place for Truth* came *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* in 1994, and this was followed in 1998 by *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*. In these volumes, I have been exploring the places of intersection between different aspects of the Christian confession and our (post)modern world.

This volume, then, brings this personal literary odyssey to its conclusion. For those kind enough to want to read what I have written, the last leg of the journey begins on the next page.