

A TIME FOR
CONFIDENCE

TRUSTING GOD IN A
POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

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A Time for Confidence: Trusting God in a Post-Christian Society

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Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

—PSALM 27:3

A TIME FOR CONFIDENCE

One day in May 1995 changed the life of Henry Wanyoike forever. He was all of twenty-one years old, and like many of his fellow Kenyans, he dreamed of making his mark as a distance runner and becoming a national hero. He had a 5K time of 13:50. That is less than 10 seconds away from the 2012 Olympic gold medal time. Distance runners don't peak until their late twenties, thirties, or even forties. At twenty-one, Wanyoike appeared to be headed for a bright future as one of Kenya's running superstars. Then, that one day, he had a stroke and lost his sight.

Depressed and disillusioned, Wanyoike drifted for the next several years. He was a lost soul. He went to a school for the blind in Machokos, Kenya. An administrator at the school knew of his running past and saw his flailing present, so he suggested that Wanyoike take up running again. Within a few years, Wanyoike

had set world records at the Paralympics and at the World Championships in the 5K and 10K.

In 2005, he had phenomenal back-to-back marathon performances. Over 26.2 miles of the streets of London, he set a world record, finishing in 2:31:31. However, he didn't have much time to celebrate—or recover. Seven days later, he broke his own record at the Hamburg Marathon in Germany.

He has since held political office and has established a foundation for the disabled in Kenya. He has singlehandedly contributed to raising awareness of the disabled in his country and has helped many formerly marginalized people find places where they can contribute. He also continues to train, with the goal of breaking his own records leading him on. In a nation of superstar runners, Wanyoike has taken a prominent place among their ranks.

Runner's World magazine featured the life story of Henry Wanyoike, calling him a visionary. When he first started running again after his stroke, he stumbled and fell a lot—even with guides to help him. With his sight gone, he was afraid. But he learned that there is something far better than sight. Michelle Hamilton, referring to something Wanyoike had said, put it this way: “Vision, as [Wanyoike] likes to point out, is more powerful than sight.”¹

What we need today, more than sight, is vision. Seeing, in our day, easily leads to fear. In fact, this has been the case through most of the ages. One of the things that separated the prophets of Israel from the people of Israel was the difference between sight and vision. The people saw the temporal, and they could not get past what they were seeing. God granted the

prophets vision of the eternal, which towered above and overshadowed the temporal.

Where the people of Israel saw problems, Israel's prophets saw God and His promises. Where the people saw allurements and temptations, the prophets saw God's call to purity and God's call to covenant obedience. Where the people mistook the shadows for the eternal and abiding reality, the prophets saw beyond the shadows and saw straight into the truly real.

If we only see what appears before us, we may easily shrink back in fear, or, worse, drift away from our first love. We can be enticed away by appearances. The book of Proverbs offers vivid accounts of the destruction that comes in the wake of being fooled by alluring sights. Seeing can lead to our ruin. Instead, we need to cultivate our vision.

Vision led Wanyoike to make a difference for his fellow disabled Kenyans, and it led him to break world records. Vision leads to accomplishments. Sight often keeps us from even getting to the starting line. Wanyoike lost his sight, but he gained vision. Sight takes us off the path; vision keeps us pressing on toward the goal.

Today, we need vision. We need not be pulled down, distressed, or disillusioned by what we see. This is a time for confidence.

Cower, Capitulate, or Cave?

This is not a time to cower. There is plenty of temptation to do so, especially if we're too busy seeing and we lack vision.

Advocates of same-sex agendas and so-called gender benders have pressed their issues through the courts, through legislatures, and through popular media with a vengeance. The speed with which both public opinion and social policy have made a 180-degree turn on these issues is unprecedented. We are experiencing cultural whiplash.

Even TV commercials are not safe. A 2015 television ad for Chobani yogurt has a woman waking up and enjoying a cup of yogurt in bed. Before she leaves and wraps herself in the sheet, she playfully runs her finger along the foot of the other person in bed with her. As the commercial ends, we see that the other person turns out to be a woman. In another commercial, Wells Fargo happily lends money to two mommies as they adopt a child. This is nothing less than an attempt to normalize a formerly culturally marginalized view.

Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' 2012 rap song "Same Love" mainstreamed same-sex relationships in rap music. Kacey Musgraves' "Follow Your Arrow" brought lyrics that extol same-sex relationships to the bastion of God and old-fashioned values: country music. In 2014, it won Song of the Year at the Country Music Awards, prompting one headline to read "A gay-loving, weed-smoking anthem just won country music's Song of the Year."

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy has thundered that gay marriage is a noble purpose. Centering his argument on "dignity," he has expressed shock at the narrowness of any opinion that dissents from the recognition of gay marriage. To be pro-gay is to be pro-human dignity, the new legal argument goes. U.S. Supreme Court justices also unfortunately practice

what they adjudicate. Back in 2013, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor presided over separate gay marriage ceremonies held in the Supreme Court Building itself.

A Time of Change

The changes are rapid and systemic, and they can lead one to feel utterly disoriented. Same-sex relationships are mainstreamed, the stuff of commercials, rap songs, country music, and Supreme Court decisions and ceremonies. The pressure on dissenters is enormous. The exertion of power to force this agenda is nearly unprecedented in American history. This could be a time to cower. But it is not.

This is not a time to capitulate. David Gushee, a Southern Baptist theologian and ethicist, once wrote against homosexuality. Then he changed his mind. Progressive pastor and author Brian MacLaren changed his mind. Rob Bell bowed before the idol of Oprah. Here's what he told a national audience on her "Super Soul Sunday": "I think the culture is already there and the church will continue to be even more irrelevant when it quotes letters from two thousand years ago as their best defense."

It's time for the church to catch up, Bell says. In order to do so, we need to look past ancient letters. Instead of looking at the dusty pages of the Bible, we need to look "in front of you [at] the flesh-and-blood people who . . . love each other and just want to go through life with someone."²

Ignore the Bible. It's irrelevant to life in the twenty-first century. Capitulate to culture and cultural norms and cultural pressures. The culture is there. Let's catch up, Bell tells us, joined by a tragically growing number of others. Bell can only see the surface. The present culture is blocking his vision.

These are only individuals. But entire Protestant denominations and Christian institutions are also choosing the predilections of culture over God's Holy Word. They care more about the drumbeat of our day than the very words of God. When we see so many people changing their views, it can look like a time to capitulate. But it's not.

This is not a time to cave. In North American contexts, we have far more exposure to adherents of other religions than people did at any other time in our history. When the founders of the United States spoke of religious freedom, they were mainly talking to Protestants, a few Roman Catholics, and a few Jews. Islam was an ocean away. Eastern religions were farther still. Consider the multiplex of religions present in any given suburban neighborhood. What does it mean to live in a religiously plural society?

One rather loud voice tells us it means tolerance. And that means, above all, no room for an exclusive view. How can you be neighborly and think your sincere, even kind, neighbor who happens to follow another religion is bound for hell? It is a time for pluralism, we are told.

Adding to this, we are told that truth is a rather elastic concept. Better to use a lower case and the plural rather than the upper case and the singular—that is, it's better to speak of *truths*

than *the Truth*. Even reality itself is up for grabs. For many today, whether due to postmodernism or the onslaught of all things “virtual,” reality is seen as a self-construct. I make and shape reality, and I am at the center of the reality I have shaped. There are no laws, no givens, no absolutes. Truth and even reality are social or individual constructs.

In the wake of the 2015 Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage across the United States, many pundits pointed out that the affirming justices followed public opinion, not strict legal guidelines. They ruled based on the ebb and flow of popular sentiment. One dissenting justice referred to the language of Justice Kennedy’s so-called argument as sounding like “a fortune cookie.”³ Public opinion replaced the rule of law. Sentiment trumped legal argument.

The social implications of this are staggering. Marriage is whatever we want it to be. Human life is defined however we want it defined. Gender is a moving target. We have plunged ourselves into a whirlpool of relativism, and we’re spiraling toward the drain.

How can the idea of truth, truth as absolute and objective reality, penetrate this new worldview?

Let’s put the matter differently. To those who have been shaped by pluralism and postmodernism, advocates of *the Truth* appear as aliens from outer space. Perhaps even better, they appear as throwbacks to the medieval era. Advocates of truth are deemed dangerous in our new cultural climate.

It can seem like a time to cave. But it’s not.

All of this only scratches the surface of the circumstances in which we live. This is our cultural moment; this is our time. Enormous pressure to cower, to capitulate, and to cave closes in on us like the unstoppable walls of a compactor. We see it. We sense it.

We have long ago passed the sign that warns of dangerous rapids ahead. We are squarely in the midst of them, frothing and foaming and threatening.

A Time of Confusion

I hadn't used my GPS device in a few years. Like most, I switched to simply using my phone. On one particular trip, though, I brought out my old GPS device for nostalgia's sake. I found it stored away in a closet, dusted it off, and plugged it into to the cigarette lighter. The problem was, I hadn't updated it—ever. Not once from the time I bought it. The maps had long swaths of green where a new highway now ran. It was confused. I was confused.

Similarly, in our rapidly changing society, we are traversing new highways over unfamiliar terrain. Lines have been crossed. Clear boundaries have been rubbed away. It's enough to leave even the casual observer scratching his head in bewilderment. We might feel like we live in an entirely new and altogether strange world.

Confusion means disorientation. It causes one not to think clearly. Confusion can even evolve into a medical condition. This state of confusion rings of tumult, even chaos. It leaves its victim debilitated.

Another nuance to the word *confusion* concerns uncertainty.

Uncertainty can stem from a lack of understanding or from an inability to sift through a cascade of data and information. Such uncertainty can be debilitating. Consider an army—it plans and advances based on clarity of purpose and mission and on certainty of intelligence. Specialists gather, interpret, and transmit information. Commanders sort through it all, drawing on their collective wisdom and experience, and then devise a strategy and give orders. Soldiers, trained and ready, launch into action. From beginning to end, the army that advances does so with a stunning certainty and clarity. A confused army is a defeated army.

We sense the confusion of our moment, the jumbling of categories. Sociologists have taken to using the term *cultural confusion*. The idea here is the loss of consensus, and with a loss of consensus comes a loss of a public ethic, public civility, and public virtue. We have become unable to tell right from wrong—sometimes, we even punish the right. We are awash in a sea of moral uncertainty and relativist ethics. That may even be a generous description. Even seas have boundaries.

You could say we have lost our moral compass. Without that moral compass, we find ourselves bewildered, disoriented, and confused.

How do we respond? What are we to make of the church's mission in this cultural moment?

Chicken Little Lives Here

I suppose many have taken the route of Chicken Little. Remember him?

In British versions of the tale, the main character is named Henny Penny. An acorn drops on the head of Henny Penny (or Chicken Little). We get the impression that this fowl is rather excitable. Immediately, Chicken Little thinks a piece of the sky has fallen. Then, that little thought gets pulled through to its “logical” conclusion. So, Chicken Little runs around telling everyone in sight that the sky is falling. The world is coming to an end.

Jerome was a bit like Chicken Little. Jerome was a late fourth- and early fifth-century scholar and church father. Eusebius Sophrinius Hieronymus—Jerome for short—was born in 347 in the Roman province of Dalmatia, in modern-day Slovenia. He showed brilliance as a young man, so he was sent off to Rome to study. His love of scholarship, not to mention the cloud of a scandal, sent him to the great ancient libraries at Alexandria and Caesarea. He is best known for his Latin translation of the Bible, called the Vulgate.

He spent the last year of his life near Bethlehem, dying in a cave.

When word of the sack of Rome by the Visigoths reached Jerome, he played Chicken Little. Jerome learned that in the mayhem surrounding the sack of Rome, a pious and well-known woman named Marcella, a former acquaintance of Jerome’s, died. Jerome took her death to portend far worse things to come. He took Marcella’s death as a sign of the death of Rome. Jerome took the death of Rome as a sign of the end of the world. Life as he knew it was crashing down. He started sending letters to his friends warning them that the end was near. In one

of those letters, he mourned, “My voice sticks in my throat and, as I dictate, sobs choke my utterance. The City which had taken the whole world was itself taken.”⁴ In another he wrote, “The world sinks into ruin: Yes!” The sky has fallen.

To be fair, the centuries after the sack of Rome were bleak. The centuries under Rome, however, were not all that sterling, either. More importantly, the world survived the sack of Rome; it even survived the Middle Ages. The sky hadn’t fallen after all.

Jerome’s fear that the end of the world had come had an ironic shortsightedness to it. His own work survived and thrived through the centuries. Jerome’s Vulgate survived. In fact, it had a full eleven centuries’ run until Greek texts and translations in common languages such as German and English supplanted it during the time of the Reformation. Jerome’s assessment of what he saw happening was wide of the mark. He miscalculated.

It is understandable how easy it could be to play the role of Chicken Little today. We might be tempted to say, “The world sinks into ruin.” The Supreme Court is against us; what can we possibly do? Should we all hide in a cave? That is not a healthy response. We can little afford to be Chicken Littles today.

Lack of Confidence

I once had a swimming coach who didn’t talk much. He observed. Carefully and constantly, he observed. The few times he did speak, his words hit dead center. The wise among us listened to those rare and precious words.

One practice, I was having a particularly difficult time

executing a turn for one of the strokes. I'd wade out to the flag, swim into the wall, and attempt the turn. Many, many tries later, I still wasn't getting it right. So I took a rest. Holding on to the wall, I was catching my breath and trying to figure out what was going wrong. My coach always had a kickboard in his hand, a constant tool. As I hung on the wall, I felt the (mostly gentle) thud of the kickboard on my head. He had my attention. I looked up at my coach through my swim goggles. Three words from my coach followed.

“You lack confidence.”

Three words rolled around in my head: “You are right.”

I have a friend who remembers hearing the same words from his dad. Over and over again, his dad told him he lacked confidence. On one occasion, my friend was going to ask a young lady out on a date. She said no. He told his dad about this. His dad was all poised to say something to him when the son interrupted and said, “I know, I know. You're going to say I lack confidence.” The dad replied, “Well, I guess that is true too. But I was going to say you lack a car.”

What we are really talking about here is not only a lack of confidence, but also a misplaced confidence. Or, to put it another way, we tend to put our confidence in the wrong thing and in the wrong place.

False confidence, or misplaced confidence, is a truly deadly thing.

Jerome might have had a misplaced confidence. Any Christian who lived after the year 312 might very well have been inclined to look favorably upon Rome. The horrors of

persecution were mostly brought to an end with the legalization of Christianity in 312 by the Emperor Constantine.

The centuries of being marginalized economically, socially, and politically had been replaced with a new era of privilege and status for Christians. Constantine overturned 275 years of persecution. Jerome witnessed firsthand the benefits that had accrued since Constantine turned Rome's protection and Rome's power to Christians and not against them. In the 410s, that era of Roman glory and Christian triumph was coming to an end. The barbarians were at the gate.

Jerome was not sure of what was coming next. What would become of the world without Rome? What would become of Christianity without Rome? He traced out every possible scenario in his mind. It was all bleak. Jerome mistakenly placed his confidence in Rome and in the empire.

Boast in . . .

A similar occurrence happened in the life of Israel. The prophet Jeremiah had a front-row seat, prophesying the exile of God's people and then witnessing the exile and the harsh realities that came along with it. In his long prophetic book, he records the consequences of misplaced confidence. As a mouthpiece for God, he declares:

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches. (Jer. 9:23)