

Does Our Lord Ask Too Much? A Neglected Issue in Apologetics Today

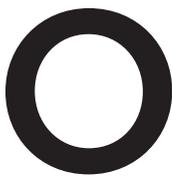
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Abstract

The article begins with a historical survey of challengers of hypocrisy and inauthentic Christianity throughout church history: Søren Kierkegaard, Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and Francis Schaeffer. It continues with two questions about the biblical warrant and feasibility of such warnings. Finally, it concludes with a consideration of two dangers facing the church today: conservatism and escapism in the church. In the end, we can only face up these challenges in the task of apologetics through the power of the gospel.

Keywords

Søren Kierkegaard, Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Francis Schaeffer, hypocrisy, mission of the church, conservatism



ne evening, we were having dinner with my wife's older sister and her husband in Anderson, South Carolina. At one point during the meal, there came a loud clatter. The house shook, and we could not hear each other talk. It ended as abruptly as it began. We asked, "What was that?" They

answered, “What was what?” In fact, it was a local railroad train speeding on the tracks behind the house. But they had heard it so many times they did not hear it anymore.

I. *Advocates against the Establishment*

There has never been a more severe critic of hypocrisy than Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). His guns were constantly aimed at the pretenses of Christendom. In his judgment, the Lutheran Christians of Denmark, in effect, could not hear the gospel anymore. His attacks are found on nearly every page of his writings, sometimes directly, often by implication. Kierkegaard has to be one of the most enigmatic theologians of any age. He was no doubt a romantic, one whose life was in part determined by his father’s cursing God, and also by his well-known engagement and then break up with Regina Olsen. He often used pseudonyms, which never really hid his identity for long. He was a fierce opponent of Hegel and Hegelian thought, finding it deterministic and rationalist.

However we might evaluate Kierkegaard’s overall theology, an issue still requiring further study, we can easily agree that his attacks on the deafness of the official church, of the clergy, within the culture of Christendom, remain a powerful challenge to this day. To pick one article, nearly at random, we discover the flavor of his approach. “The *Instant*, No 5” is an editorial in a series originally written for *The Fatherland*, a daily paper published in Copenhagen.¹ Among his many arguments, he reminds the reader (provocatively) that God, the God of love, is really our mortal enemy, because he requires us to give up every earthly good.² He equates believing in official Christianity with playing happy music at a funeral.³ The true pattern for the Christian life is to be lowly, not great. To espouse Christendom unthinkingly is equivalent to regressing to walking on all fours, like an infant, pitting dogmas against the truth, the very opposite of the call to be real.⁴ The sober truth is that in the pretense of leaving paganism behind, we have simply baptized pagan practices as “Christian.” If you really want to be a Christian in the New Testament sense, you will experience “sheer

¹ July 27, 1855 (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels’ Estate & Heirs, Bianco Luno’s Press). Here we will refer to “The *Instant*, No. 5,” trans. Walter Lowrie in Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 155–77.

² *Ibid.*, 157.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

anguish, crucifying the flesh, hating oneself.”⁵ He ends this essay with reflections on the passages about those who like to walk in long robes (Mark 12:38; Luke 20:46).⁶ Jesus is not criticizing the size of people’s clothes, but their ostentatious vanity.

One of the most critical tasks for doing Christian apologetics today, as in every day, is to ask our people to stop and listen to the train. Put differently; we need to be warned against presuming that our relation to God is safe because we have ensconced ourselves in a secure place.

Kierkegaard stands in a long line of prophetic evangelists who attack the hypocrisy and false security of “Christian” culture and refuse to face God as he really is. In their own often different ways, preachers such as Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and Francis Schaeffer similarly plead for authentic religion over against the lazy practices of the cultural Christian.

Bernard de Clairvaux (1090–1153) argued for spiritual authenticity within the confines of the official church. He was the confidant of five popes. His primary opponent was Peter Abelard, whom he considered to be a rationalist with little spiritual understanding. While working tirelessly as a reformer, Bernard managed to preach extensively. His most expansive series was on the Song of Solomon. There are some eighty-six sermons in the series, each one a meditation on the relation of God to the human soul. Drawing extensively on the analogy between the bride and the bridegroom, he appeals to the need for mutual love: “The Father is never fully known if He is not loved perfectly.”⁷ “But the love of a bridegroom—or rather of the Bridegroom who is love—asks only the exchange of love and trust. Let the Beloved love in return. How can the bride—and the bride of love—do other than love? How can Love not be loved?”⁸

Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was the fiery Florentine preacher who railed against the corruption of the city and the pope. Machiavelli called him an “unarmed prophet.” His sermon series on Amos and Ezekiel, for example, includes fierce attacks against the corruption of local government and the venality of the papacy. At one point, he convinced the city of Florence to hold a “bonfire of the vanities,” a great fire in which books, clothing, cards, and other worldly objects were burned up. His aggressive messages eventually earned him the death penalty. If we could sympathetically summarize

⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁶ Ibid., 174–77.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 83,” in *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN413/bernard_sermons.html.

⁸ Ibid.

his message, though, it would be the triumph of the cross of Christ over worldly wisdom. For example, in his series on “Ruth and Micheas,” he preached on not avoiding but facing death with realism and grace, as Jesus had done.⁹ Savonarola’s was a wake-up call against the blind authority of official power.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) railed against the religious apparatus of his day. In what was perhaps his most vehement critique of the establishment published in the extraordinarily prolific summer of 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he boldly attacked the sacramental system of Rome. His reasoning was not limited to the critique of the number seven and reduction to two (baptism and the Lord’s Supper—though initially he retained penance, only redefining it to require contrition of the penitent). His reasoning implied a significant reduction of the official church’s power to control the lives of believers. Hitherto, the claims of the Roman Catholic Church were so tied to the efficacy of the sacraments that the power of the priesthood rose or fell with them. According to Roland Bainton, “The repudiation of ordination as a sacrament demolished the caste system of clericalism and provided a sound basis for the priesthood of all believers.”¹⁰ And his reduction of the mass to the Lord’s Supper was less an attack on the priesthood as it was on the interpretation that the Eucharist was mechanical, the resacrifice of Christ, a ceremony that was valid *ex opere operato* (“by the work worked” or efficaciously) regardless of the faith of the participant. In consequence, he concluded, not only the priests but the laity should have access to the cup as well as the bread.¹¹

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) famously pleaded for an authentic religious experience, opposing it to the many forms of counterfeits of the experience of grace. In three seminal works, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), and above all in his classic, *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746), he compared true faith to its forgeries. To take but one example among many, he contrasts “legal humiliation” with “evangelical humiliation.”¹² The former is when the mind, moved by the Holy Spirit,

⁹ Girolamo Savonarola, “Ruth and Micheas,” Sermon XXVIII from *The Art of Dying Well* (All Souls’ Day, November 2, 1496), reprinted in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 41.

¹⁰ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1950), 106.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *A Prelude by Martin Luther on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser; online: Project Wittenberg, December 3, 2002, <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/etext/luther/babylonian/babylonian.htm#2.5>.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (1746; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 237–66.

comes to the conviction that God is great and fearful, convicting us of our exceeding sinfulness and of our liability at the judgment of God. The latter comes when our hearts are disposed to discover “God’s holy beauty.” The contrast is between having a proper despair over our not being able to help ourselves and being “brought sweetly to yield.”¹³ Timothy Keller, one of the great preachers of our times, beseeches preachers to be “affectionate.” Following Edwards, he says you cannot manufacture affection: “Your heart needs to be soft toward God and toward people.” This requires both a certain freedom from your notes [as a preacher], but above all the frequent practice of prayer.¹⁴

We could multiply examples. Closer to our own day, Schaeffer loved to appeal to our need to know God, not only intellectually, but in reality. The term *reality* was often used at L’Abri, the community which the Schaeffers founded in the 1950s. They were concerned to “exhibit the reality of the supernatural to a generation that has lost its way” in an age of imitations.¹⁵

II. *Biblical Warrant for These Calls?*

Two questions need to be asked here. First, do these severe admonitions have biblical warrant? And, second, if they do, can they possibly be heeded? To the first, there is a wealth of passages that require the principle of authenticity, as well as many that showcase people who do or do not conform to it.

We might remember the defining event shortly after Solomon’s death when the kingdom was divided in two. Jeroboam claimed the north, and in order to keep the people from loyalty to the true remnant in the south, made idols and two counterfeit altars, one in Bethel, the other in Dan, and then told the people they no longer had to take the wearisome journey to Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:25–33; 13:33–34; and see 15:34). He went further and appointed false priests. Also, he changed the sacred calendar. It is significant that a number of the anticlerical revolutions in modern history attempted to revise the calendar. The French Revolutionary calendar, for example, placed year one just after the Assembly was dissolved and designed each month to be 30 days, with names derived from parts of nature, a week to be ten days (replacing Sunday as the day of rest with the tenth day, or *decadi*).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 168.

¹⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1977), 70.

This new calendar was meant to represent the supremacy of reason over the church. It lasted until Napoleon's coronation.¹⁶

So many of the prophets rail against Israel's slouching into a surface religiosity that hides the need for authentic dispositions. Picking nearly at random, take the case of Hosea. The Lord's appeal for authenticity is not only a brutal demand for truth, but also a passionate entreaty to consider the consequences of abandoning his extravagant love. There is plenty of wrath (Hos 5:14; 7:1–3; 8:5; 12:2). And the hypocrisy of celebrating festivals without integrity is denounced (8:13; 9:5; 10:1–2). But the prophecy also recalls God's affection for his people and thus the tragedy of their forsaking him: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1); "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk I led them with cords of kindness, with hands of love" (11:3–4). Like a father who hates to discipline a child, the Lord asks, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" (11:8). In the end, he promises to take his children back and heal them (14:4–7).

The New Testament is no less poignant. It is fitting to consider the famous parable called "The Prodigal Son" (sometimes renamed "The Two Brothers" or even "The Prodigal God"; Luke 15:11–32). Here our Lord compares two reactions to the Father's love. The one is from the penitent prodigal. The text tells us that after he had exhausted his resources, he "came to himself" (v. 17). The father came running to greet him and interrupted his prepared speech. His old home feted his return with a great celebration. The elder brother, by contrast, was angry and would not share in the joy. His terrible words include these: "Look, these many years I have served you and never disobeyed your command" (v. 29). He did not understand the privilege, the joy, the wonder of a loving God.

One of the most poignant stories confirming the dreadfulness of a frozen heart is the episode about the ten lepers, two chapters from this one (Luke 17:11–19). Leprosy was a term used for what we now call Hansen's disease, an infestation of *Mycobacterium leprae*, a bacterium that attacks the nervous system. In biblical times and even to some extent today, it so disfigured the victim that he or she was required to be isolated. According to Leviticus 13:45–46, this pollution required the victim to shout, "Unclean, unclean!" while traveling. It is hard to imagine a greater opprobrium. In our story, the ten cried out to Jesus for mercy, upon which he directed them to show themselves to the priest. The law required a leper to show himself to the priest only after healing was complete. Here, they were healed as they went.

¹⁶ Napoleon wisely told the pope the country would revert to the Gregorian calendar—on condition he would come and place the crown on his head!

And then the drama: only one, a Samaritan, turned back and worshiped Jesus in gratitude (v. 16). There is a good deal going on in this story, including Luke's growing emphasis that the Gentiles would respond to the good news when many of God's ancient people would not. Why? As Fred Craddock puts it, "Israel's special place in God's plan for the world had turned in upon itself, duty had become privilege, and frequent favors had settled into blinding familiarity."¹⁷

In view of the temptation to a surface religion, the New Testament puts the most severe warning to us. "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men," Jesus declares, quoting Isaiah (Mark 7:7; Isa 29:13). Although a good deal of the accusation of hypocrisy is addressed to the Pharisees and other religious leaders, in all, it is an equal opportunity disease. In his sobering words in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord tells us the gate is narrow, and those who find it are few (Matt 7:14). Matthew records the story of the wedding feast, which concludes, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:1–14). Only eight people were saved during Noah's flood, Peter reminds us (1 Pet 3:20).

On one reading, these texts tell us that only a few will be saved. That is a plausible interpretation. However, there are several problems with this view. One is the apparent teaching to the contrary in the Bible. For example, John records in the Revelation that he beheld "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb" (Rev 7:9, cf. 5:9). Jesus tells his followers, a "little flock," not to fear (Luke 12:32).

In a marvelous article, Benjamin Warfield tackles the question of these apparently small numbers head-on.¹⁸ His basic argument is that the gate is narrow and those who find it are few because the moral requirements for entry are difficult. However, this is not because the Bible is doing a numerical survey; rather, it is stressing the need for authenticity and denying a hereditary right to salvation. "The point of the remark [that many will strive to enter] is that salvation is not to be assumed by anyone as a matter of course, but is to be sought with earnest and persistent faith."¹⁹ The ultimate message of the New Testament is not about small numbers but the need for grace. The gospel is the decisive reversal of human religion, which teaches that we enter the kingdom as a right, not a privilege. It is the very writer Luke who goes on to tell us of the massive expansion of the church in the first century.

¹⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 203.

¹⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Are They Few That Be Saved?," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 334–50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 340.

Thus, to our second question, can the severe warnings of the Bible be heeded, or, to put it another way, is anyone qualified to pass the test of authenticity? Along with Warfield and, indeed, with all five of our cautionary fathers, we answer that—not in our own wisdom, but yet in the grace of God—the answer is affirmative. Often the very accounts of the difficulty (*viz.*, impossibility) of entering into God’s kingdom give a key to its opportunity. An outstanding case is that of the rich young man (known as the rich young ruler in many translations), as recorded in Luke 18:18–30 and parallel passages. After the disturbing story of a wealthy young man unable to give up his resources in order to follow Christ, the Lord tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (v. 25), to which the perceptive disciples asked—not “How may rich persons be saved?” but “Then who can be saved?” (v. 26). Jesus’s commanding answer is memorable: “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (v. 27). And he finishes with the promise that whoever leaves (unhealthy) attachments to property and family for the sake of the kingdom will be generously rewarded (vv. 29–30).

III. *Two Contemporary Dangers*

In the end, as G. K. Chesterton has put it, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”²⁰ Had he said, “It has been found impossible,” he would have been closer to the truth.

What, then, is the secure place to warn people against in our own times, and, more importantly, what real hope can we bring to them? Since we are no longer living in Christendom, we cannot make one-to-one applications of the critiques of Luther or Kierkegaard to the cultural captivity of professing Christians today. Still, much of what they say is valid for church-going people who are inclined to rest in the false security of religious life, often connected with some cultural ideal. It can be a simple nostalgia for better times. It seems to me that the false security is more in some permutation of modern Western ideals than the long robes of Danish pastors. Let me address just two of them.

1. *Temptation to Conservatism*

The first is what I would like to call the temptation to conservatism. Many believers identify with conservatism. I do on many points. But what is it?

²⁰ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, part 1, chapter 5 (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1717/1717-h/1717-h.htm#link2H_4_0006.

We have recently lost one of the great voices representing conservatism, namely, Roger Scruton. A he put it, conservatism is “as much a temperament as a philosophy.”²¹ The history of Western and American conservatism is long and involved, going back at least to the first critics of the French Revolution.²² More recently, in many countries conservatism has moved more resolutely to a right-wing radicalism. And in the United States, many evangelical Christians have embraced a quite radical version of conservatism.²³

A number of the ties between conservative values and the Christian faith are undeniable. The general commitment to such traditional ideals as respect for freedom of speech and for the liberty of public expressions of faith, as well as to the elevation of life, education in the classics, and the family should be cited. Perhaps also important is the conservative opposition to laissez-faire morality and the not-so-hidden tenacity of what is politically correct. At the same time, we ought carefully to disentangle any lock-step association of the Christian faith, particularly in its evangelical expression, from conservatism in general. D. G. Hart has helpfully reminded us that any “ism” is a potential pitfall, including the temptation to conservatism. For in its critique of ideologies, it unwittingly slouches into its own ideology.²⁴ And today, in the United States, the “elephant in the room,” the success of Donald Trump, has rightly caused a number of evangelicals to debate the association of the Christian faith with his particular brand of conservatism. There are those, such as Jerry Falwell Jr., who enter the “Faustian bargain” that produces greater right-to-life views and the placing of conservatives on the Supreme Court, regardless of the character of the facilitator. There are others such as Michael Gerson, who has seriously questioned the support of evangelicals for a president he considers to be a narcissistic bully.²⁵ Alan

²¹ Dominic Green, “Roger Scruton: A Conservative for Modern Times,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/roger-scruton-a-conservative-for-modern-times-11578955867>.

²² There exist several reliable histories of the conservative temperament. See Roger Scruton, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition* (Chippenham: Horsell’s Morsels, 2017); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Gateway, 2001); Gregory L. Schneider, *Conservatism in America Since 1930: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

²³ See, for example, Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatives* (New York: Norton, 2011); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ See D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

²⁵ See Michael Gerson, “Trump Has Adopted the Coward’s Conception of Heroism,” *The Times*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.timesonline.com/opinion/20191218/michael-gerson-trump-has-adopted-cowards-conception-of-heroism>.

Jacobs goes so far as to suggest the term “evangelical” has lost its meaning since it has become a voting block with mixed success and short-term gains, but which in effect gains the world but loses the soul.²⁶

Perhaps the most helpful suggestion from an evangelical is Os Guinness’s view that Trump is not the problem, but a symptom of a society’s obliviousness about the true sources of freedom. Guinness has told his evangelical colleagues that fierce debates for or against Trump are both uncivil and ignorant of the real question: how can we be free? In the end, we are faced with two options, he contends, 1776 and 1789 (the American or the French Revolution).²⁷ As could be expected, Guinness argues for the first, insisting that freedom requires virtue and faith.

My point here is not to weigh in on the present American political scene, nor for that matter on the European situation (I was raised in France), but simply to ask that we be alerted to the dangers of the systematic and often unthinking association of the Christian faith with one particular cultural or political stance. This is *not* to say we should be like the ostrich and hide away from facing the important questions. But we should do so with the kind of authenticity the above visionaries asked for, seeking first the kingdom of God, while also rendering to Caesar what rightly belongs to him in God’s world.

2. *The Church, Not Simply a Refuge*

A second example is a bit different. I see a danger in Western Christians assuming the church is merely a safe refuge. I do not want to take any cheap shots here. The church is such a precious institution, and my own involvement with it has been a priceless part of my life. Much more important, our Lord declared that it was on the rock of apostolic confession that he himself would build his church and that not only would the gates of hell itself not prevail against it but its leaders would be given the very keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:18–19). So there can be no doubt about the ultimate victory of Christ’s church.

My concern is with the way some believers can use the church. It can become a place to reinforce our natural tendency to look for a safe haven,

²⁶ See his now infamous article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Alan Jacobs, “Evangelical Has Lost Its Meaning,” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/the-end-of-evangelical/598423/>. This bargain has been defended by certain conservatives as well. At least one of them declares that private foibles should have no bearing on the virtues of public policy; Dennis Prager, “A Response to the Editor of Christianity Today,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2019/12/28/Dennis-Prager-A-response-to-the-editor-of-Christianity-Today/stories/201912280007>.

²⁷ See Os Guinness, *Last Call for Liberty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018).

often where everyone looks alike, and forget the need to reach out. Years ago, my friend C. John Miller experienced and then promoted a renewal in church life whose effects are still being felt today. He writes about it in the classic *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*.²⁸ Nothing revolutionary, really, and not everyone agrees with all of the content. But the basic message is that the church needs to function as a missionary organization far better than it does. Perhaps Miller's most helpful content focuses on the nature of the local church. After some meditations on passages such as 1 Peter 2:9–10, he asks (almost) rhetorically, "What, then, is the basic, fundamental nature of the church? To serve itself and its own self-centered interests? Or even first of all to serve others?" His answer should not surprise us, but maybe it does: "No, its fundamental character is to belong to God."²⁹

Miller goes on to admonish Christians that belonging to God should mean generous outreach. He warns against being passive in relation to the world and its own life.³⁰ He gently criticizes local churches for not going "beyond the ordinary" and failing to realize that the Great Commission is not only about foreign missions, but about values, practices, attitudes across the board.³¹ The rest of the book, like the "new life" movement he helped spawn, is filled with practical admonitions on developing the courage to reach out. Though many of these views are incontrovertible, there has been, no doubt predictably, severe criticism of Miller and the movement he spawned, the New Life churches, for nurturing superficial revivalism. This opposition is of varying degrees of thoughtfulness.³² Of course, throughout church history, both support and criticism of the more revivalist church have been going on. My only point here is not to take sides, nor even to go deeper into the pros and cons of a particular missionary church, but simply to affirm the rightness of the caution against becoming ingrown. And the last thing we want to do, any more than Miller did, is to motivate people on either side out of guilt.³³

We might come at this from a different angle. Most countries in Europe, and certainly in North America, are struggling with questions about

²⁸ C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67, and ad loc.

³² See Geoff Thomas, "The Movement Called 'Sonship,'" *The Banner of Truth*, December 1, 2000, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2000/the-movement-called-sonship/>.

³³ A similar point is made in the area of finance by my friend James Petty. He argues that our lives and our money should exhibit the central truth of the gospel, that God is a giving God. See James C. Petty, *Act of Grace: The Power of Generosity to Change Your Life, the Church and the World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019).

immigration. People from places of great hardship are flooding through the gates, hoping for a better life. Germany has the largest foreign-born population in Europe, many of them coming from Poland, Turkey, and Russia. France and the United Kingdom count together well over nine million foreign-born immigrants. Switzerland has a high number, as do Austria, Sweden, and Ireland.³⁴ In North America, the United States is home to some 44 million immigrants, 13.5% of the total population.³⁵ In 2016, Canada showed nearly 30% of its population to be foreign-born.³⁶ Besides the magnitude of the numbers, these statistics often represent extreme destitution and persecution in the home countries, as well as the difficulty of integration to the new homeland.

What does the gospel say to us about the issues? Certainly, the first thing to say is that there is no “silver bullet” or one-size-fits-all solution. The extreme temptations on the “right” include simply closing all borders. The opposite extreme is an unqualified invitation to come and live in the home country. I am not qualified to make public policy judgments on these matters. What I think we can more safely do is evaluate our churches and their policies of compassion and put them to the test without using guilt tactics. In a series of articles on these subjects, Calvin Seerveld offers a few suggestions.³⁷ His key theological point throughout is that humanness should not be determined by “ethnic cultural minority colorfulness” but by conformity to God’s image.³⁸ This should not lead to a melting pot but to the privilege of immigrants being respected and the joy of being able to contribute to the new homeland from their background.

The basis for the respect due should not be Lockean tolerance, nor Enlightenment *fraternité*, but what he dubs “tough love.” By this he means that anyone who has power over another should do everything to support his or her dependent. He calls this, deliberately riffing off of Darwin, supporting “the survival of the weakest.”³⁹ He enjoins us to open our eyes to human neighbors in need of care. Though many of Seerveld’s practical

³⁴ Information received from the International Organization for Migration, 17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland, <https://www.iom.int/contact-us>.

³⁵ See “United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/regions/united-states>.

³⁶ See “Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census,” *The Daily*, October 25, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm>.

³⁷ Calvin G. Seerveld, “Minorities and Xenophobia,” and “Beyond Tolerance to Tough Love,” in *Cultural Problems in Western Society*, ed. John H. Kok (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2014) 1–16, 17–34.

³⁸ Seerveld, “Minorities and Xenophobia,” 7.

³⁹ Seerveld, “Beyond Tolerance to Tough Love,” 24.

solutions bear on nations and how to treat immigrant minorities, much of it applies to the church. Admittedly, much of this is theoretical, but the larger principles of caring for the weakest ought to inform church ministry. This could look as basic as helping the foreign-born find work or health care. It could look as difficult as respecting the worship styles of newer members without eradicating the treasury accumulated by the church. And it will want to move from the legitimate concerns of the local church to other Christians, at home or abroad.

Conclusion

Where do these considerations leave us? With many questions, of course. But are we not due for a healthy self-examination in response to the challenges, both from the fathers and, more critically, from the Scriptures, about resting thoughtlessly in a tradition, an ideology or a set of religious practices that cloud the way to a genuine relationship to the living God? The gospel demands it. The discipline of apologetics will not mean very much if we do not stress it, for the goal is not to win arguments but to exalt Christ and win souls. But can we accomplish it? Absolutely not, unless the power of God to salvation is at work (Rom 1:16–17).