

REVIEW OF BRYAN FRASER'S *WINNING A GENERATION WITHOUT THE LAW*¹

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INTRODUCTION

Happy coincidence led me to this book. On January 7, 2011 the Grace Evangelical Society's facebook page linked to a web page entitled, "Take the Gospel Quiz."² Intrigued by the test, I dug further into the website and discovered the test's author, Bryan Fraser, and his book, which serves as the basis for the test. That book is the subject of this review.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Free Grace advocates will find this book profitable. There is plenty here that is agreeable and useful. For example, his statement that the only spiritual transaction available to the unbeliever is to believe in Jesus is refreshing.³ His incisive comment that Christianity has laden the gospel with legal obligations that the unregenerate

¹ Bryan Fraser, *Winning a Generation Without the Law: Essentials of the Gospel for a Postmodern Culture* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2010). This book is 192 pages in length and paperback. It lists for \$14.99.

² <http://gospelwithoutlaw.com/test1/>. Accessed January 7, 2011.

³ Fraser, *Winning*, 83. Editor's note: Of course, unbelievers can also repent (Acts 17:30), and they can please God by giving alms and praying (Acts 10:4, 35; cf. 11:14). Surely what Fraser means by this comment is that the only spiritual transaction *guaranteed to result in the immediate possession of everlasting life* available to the unbeliever is to believe in Jesus.

cannot fulfill is a penetrating indictment of Lordship theology (pp. 84-90).⁴

At times the book frustrates. There is no bibliography, there are no footnotes, interaction with relevant literature is absent, and Biblical citations are scant. Although it reflects deep thought, a clear understanding of the gospel, and careful exegesis of salient Biblical passages, this book was written for the lay reader.

Still, this provocative book offers numerous useful contributions to Free Grace theology. It will be profitable reading for this journal's audience, particularly chapters one ("The Battle of the Past"), four ("The Battle of the Soul"), and eight ("The Battle of the Law").

THEME, THESIS, AND PURPOSE

The book's theme is Christianity's long history of failure to understand the distinction between the law and the gospel (p. ix). Fraser's thesis is that Christianity's mistaken insistence on framing society's departure from the law as a rejection of Christ is due to its own failure to understand and declare the gospel to a culture without the law (p. x). His purpose is to persuade the reader that the "model of a visibly activist, culturally dominant Christianity is not practical, necessary or even possible" and to urge Christianity to forsake its use of politics and law to speak to the culture, allowing it to play a role similar to the one it fulfilled in the first century (pp. 34-35).

The book raises a number of issues that should attract the attention of Bible students and practitioners. The theme intersects the interests of Free Grace adherents and Missional Church practitioners.⁵ This review focuses on points of interest to Free Grace proponents.

⁴ Fraser does not mention Lordship Salvation but his critique of the typical evangelistic offer applies equally to the theology of the Lordship Salvation school.

⁵ "Missional Church" refers to a significantly different paradigm to conceptualize "church." At the risk of oversimplification, the primary

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is comprised of a prologue, ten chapters, a conclusion and an appendix. Each chapter examines a battle that has drawn Christianity's attention at the expense of its mission. Fraser believes that the gospel does not need to have these battles waged (pp. 34-35). These battles are:

1. The Battle of the Past
2. The Battle of the Will
3. The Battle of the Flesh
4. The Battle of the Soul
5. The Battle of the Mind
6. The Battle of the Present
7. The Battle of the World
8. The Battle of the Law
9. The Battle of Being Right
10. The Battle of the Future

PROLOGUE

The lengthy Prologue (pp. 15-29) prepares the reader for Fraser's purpose and his perspective on Christianity's proper response to postmodernism. The prologue is an allegorical tale of the author's encounter with Jesus in an offbeat, vaguely New Age deli, The Enchanted Mushroom. In their conversation Jesus tells the author he

distinction between Missional Church and what its adherents call "attractional church" is this: "Whenever the local church does attempt to engage the world in evangelism, it most often employs a 'y'all come' type of outreach. *The church, in effect, throws some type of party and expects the world to come to it*" [my emphasis]. Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), xxiv. In contrast, a Missional Church is wholly organized to deploy all of its resources to carry Christ out to the community rather than attempting to bring the community into church to encounter Christ. Although the distinctive characteristics of the Missional Church are straightforward, those of long affiliation with or who have a major stake in the attractional church paradigm may find the distinction between the two elusive and mistake their "outreach" efforts as fitting the missional category. A helpful rule of thumb is to ask, "Do you expect this effort to increase attendance at your church meeting?" If so, the church is probably not genuinely missional.

is disappointed with what has become of Christianity and gives him the task of delivering a message to the Church.

The allegorical church has allowed postmodernism to dislodge Christianity from its role in the culture because it has been co-opted by the world. Its lampstand has been removed because it has come to rely on the exercise of political power rather than on the Spirit. “Today my people have become more like the wolf pack itself, using its tremendous strength and cunning to surround and take down its prey” (p. 23). “They have made too many unholy alliances with the kings of the land. They invoked my name too often in the pursuit of their own security, comfort and dominance” (p. 26). In the process of exercising political influence the church has “usurped the role of my Spirit. They have taken on themselves the task of conviction” (p. 24). Henceforth these means will be useless in pursuit of the Lord’s purposes (p. 23). Christendom will be humbled, having its place of honor and respect stripped away, but in the end it will emerge with a new heart and a new vision for its task (p. 26).

Fraser’s point is that Christianity is preoccupied with preserving a culture that has passed beyond recovery. It has failed its God-given task of offering eternal life.⁶ It now sits on a hostile frontier, in a culture so foreign that it must abandon the familiar tools of political influence and declaration of the law previously used to advance the gospel (p. 25).⁷

⁶ Fraser neglects the disciple-making task, reducing Christianity’s commission to the sole task of offering the gospel to the world. In the allegory he places the following words on the lips of Jesus: “My people have lost their way. *I sent them into the world to accomplish one task: to testify of me and to proclaim the life that I offer to those who thirst and hunger,*” (p. 24) [my emphasis]. The task of disciple making has been overlooked here. But, in his defense, the larger point is true; in its relationship to the world Christianity in America has deteriorated into an exercise of political power, proclamation of the law to the unsaved, and woeful neglect of the gracious offer of the gospel.

⁷ I assume this is Fraser’s meaning when Jesus, in the allegory, states, “they will be forced to abandon their weapons of flesh and blood.” If so, then I agree.

Free Grace supporters will endorse his view that it is fruitless to use the law as a means of presenting the gospel in this postmodern culture.⁸ According to Fraser the “bad news” of legal separation from God is theologically correct,⁹ “but it is a poor access point to the gospel for a culture that is without the law” (p. 138).

Missional Church practitioners will embrace his proposition that Christianity should abandon methods of relating to the culture that it has relied on in the past.¹⁰

THE BATTLE OF THE PAST

The first of Christianity’s ten battles is the “battle of the past.” Here Fraser briefly describes the distinguishing marks of postmodernism and discusses Christianity’s ineffective response. “The battle of the past is Christianity’s struggle to restore the 20th century culture that was under the law” (p. 31). His savory observation that the postmodern worldview “has transformed the theological, ethical and philosophical baselines of Western society with the silent efficiency of a stage crew changing sets between acts of a play” captures the unexpected speed with

⁸ Chapter 8, “The Battle of the Law” (pp. 136-46), expands on Fraser’s view on this.

⁹ Many Free Grace proponents (this reviewer included) will disagree with Fraser’s view that the use of the law in an evangelistic setting may be theologically correct even if ineffective in a postmodern culture. See further comments under the heading “Battle of the Law.”

¹⁰ *Missional Church* denotes a loosely organized but increasingly influential movement that seeks to re-examine ecclesiology and to implement practices that are closer to the Biblical text and appropriate to the emerging culture. I have found several volumes to be helpful in understanding this movement. In addition to Cole see also Alan Hirsch and Leonard Sweet, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Allelon Missional Series) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010). There are a number of areas in which Free Grace adherents and Missional Church practitioners will have common interest.

which postmodernism has dislodged its predecessor (p. 32). In this shift four values have been incorporated into the unexamined lives of postmodern people: pragmatism, pantheism, relativism, and egocentrism (p. 36).

A simple, straightforward definition is offered for each term. Pragmatism signifies the view that a thing is true if it is perceived as practical or desirable (p. 37). Relativism is the belief that right and wrong are “adjustable” rather than being either transcendent or fixed (p. 39). Egocentrism is “that theory of meaning where a document means whatever the reader takes it to mean. The role of the writer is diminished, if not eliminated entirely” (p. 41). Pantheism “is the teaching that God is the universe and the universe is God (p. 38).

Christianity reacted to this cultural shift by attempting to protect its turf. A more appropriate response is to embrace this as an opportunity to lay aside our least effective tools (p. 45).¹¹

These four assumptions are so thoroughly integrated into contemporary, postmodern society.... While the predominant reaction of Christians to this seismic ideological transformation of Western culture is generally negative, I will refrain from calling it so (p. 42).

Fraser offers an interesting insight that Free Grace adherents will want to see developed further. He observes correctly that collectivism, one logical outcome of pantheism, creates an insurmountable existential crisis for postmoderns (p. 39). Postmodernism cannot answer the human heart’s most basic questions: “Does God know me or love me?”¹² This affords a unique opening for God’s gracious message. Free Grace adherents understand that

¹¹ He notes, tartly, that contemporary Christianity is devoting far too much energy to preserving its power and privilege. As a result it has become self-focused, looks to the past, and acts as if it had somehow been inconvenienced (p. 42). I agree with Fraser that the correct response should be for Christianity to forget the past, lay aside useless tools, and forge ahead.

¹² In this regard postmodernism creates the same dilemma that polytheism created for inhabitants of the first century. Absent any doctrine of

neither the Reformed Lordship answer (“maybe”) nor the Arminian Lordship answer (“yes, but”) is accurate or appropriate. Only Free Grace theology allows an unqualified answer of “Absolutely!”

This chapter will also interest practitioners in the Missional Church movement. There is no citation or reference to indicate that Fraser has read the literature, but it is clear that he is familiar with this encouraging development in ecclesiology. Either that, or he has independently arrived at many of the same conclusions:

Today’s new social order offers Christianity the opportunity to define and understand itself more clearly and accurately than it has ever done before...(p. 43).

Christianity will need to abandon its traditional ways of interacting with society because the well-worn paths into its institutions no longer have the ‘welcome’ signs up. It will have to blow the dust off older strategies it neglected while it enjoyed its former favor in the public spotlight (p. 44).

Postmodern thought creates monumental challenges to Christianity’s previously privileged position. This poses the critical question of the hour: Will Christianity fulfill the role that Jesus handed to it in the first century, or will it attempt to recover the role that it took for itself in the 20th century (p. 33)?

This chapter would have been enriched by brief discussion of consumerism’s role in this battle and its contribution to the demise of Christianity’s influence. From my perspective, as a practitioner of church revitalization in troubled congregations, it is almost impossible to overstate the damage consumerism has inflicted on churches, pastors, and the public face of Christianity. Consumerism, strictly speaking, is not unique to postmodernism, but

grace, neither the Roman nor the Greek pantheons were capable of providing the assurance of transcendent, divine love.

neither are the four assumptions in this chapter. Unlike those assumptions, which many Christians would purge from our culture, consumerism is sacrosanct. It is so deeply embedded in church growth literature that few even think to question it. Fortunately, a detailed analysis of the destructive effects of consumerism is one important contribution of the Missional Church movement.

THE BATTLE OF THE WILL

This chapter examines “Christianity’s effort to impose the law on an unwilling society” and its propensity to use political power and the electoral process to impose its will in the public arena (p. 47). Fraser approaches the issue by introducing the Reformed notion of two governmental spheres. God’s “government of creation” is the way that He superintends the entire created order:

Through his government of creation, God creates all peoples in his image, gives them wisdom and understanding through his Spirit, requires them to live justly with one another, hears their prayers, and honors their obedience to the laws of creation (p. 47).¹³

In his brief description of the second government, the government of redemption, Fraser’s sympathy with the Free Grace position, particularly his understanding of the saving message, appears in stark relief. He defines the government of redemption as the means by which God superintends “those who believe in his Son unto eternal life” (p. 47).¹⁴ It is rare to hear someone largely unknown in Free Grace circles declare the saving message without

¹³ It is tempting to evaluate this statement in detail but such a critique would exceed the scope of this review. Since Fraser is writing for a lay audience it would be unfair to criticize this statement as if it represented a comprehensive statement of Fraser’s views on the matter; this schema is a useful (if incomplete) tool for examining contemporary Christianity’s misplaced reliance on political power and the electoral process to impose its will in the public sphere.

¹⁴ This is a clear allusion and almost a direct quote of 1 Tim 1:16.

qualifiers like “true faith” or “genuine faith” and without unbiblical conditions such as commitment, obedience, confession, submission, or any of a number of other prerequisites that properly belong to discipleship, not admission to eternal life.

Fraser finds history replete with examples of Christianity employing tools that belong to the government of creation to advance the government of redemption.¹⁵ Although the relationship between these two governments has been a source of significant debate over the centuries (p. 16), we do know that trouble ensues when Christianity confuses them (pp. 48, 57-59). Perhaps Fraser had the politically conservative wing of American Christianity in mind when he wrote that “much of Christianity’s effort today to exert its influence is driven by the same domineering, imperialistic spirit” that produced the Crusades, European Colonialism, the Inquisition, and numerous other catastrophes.¹⁶

Free Grace adherents should appreciate Fraser’s thoughts on the error of conflating the two governments; those of the Reformed persuasion will likely disagree.¹⁷ He sees in Christianity’s use of the government of creation as a fundamental disregard for the human freedom to choose and as a failure to understand Christianity’s basic mission.¹⁸ “Christ is only welcome in the government of creation by invitation” (p. 51). Going forward Christianity

¹⁵ This would include military power, politics, the electoral process and the courts.

¹⁶ Fraser mentions only the Crusades (p. 49) and alludes to European Colonialism.

¹⁷ Particularly those who are persuaded of the doctrine of “Total Inability.” He observes that when Christianity acquires political power it inevitably exercises it to protect its own interests and comfort (p. 53). He pungently notes “Armies march to war so that the victors can impose their will upon the vanquished. Political parties work to win elections so that they can impose their will upon the minority. Even Christianity, when it finds itself in a position of political advantage, cannot resist the temptation to inflict its will upon the unwilling” (p. 59).

¹⁸ It is Fraser’s view that Christianity should, like its Lord, respect the freedom of human choice, including the freedom to choose poorly (pp. 54-64). He concludes that Christianity wandered from Jesus’ free offer to all who

should adjust to the fact that “the government of creation has no obligation to recognize the government of redemption” (p. 51).

Fraser attributes the political divide between believers over the proper use of the organs of government to their profound failure to understand the mission. “Christianity’s mandate is not to impose God’s law on the government of creation; it is to make disciples” (p. 52). His opponents may argue that in a democracy it is appropriate and even necessary to use political power to create an environment in which evangelism and discipleship may flourish. This overlooks the fact that Christianity flourishes when it is excluded from the halls of power. In the face of severe governmental sanctions Christianity revolutionized the Greco-Roman world during the first several centuries of the Christian era and it has experienced dramatic growth of the underground church in China over the last sixty years.¹⁹

Students of history and political theory will probably be dissatisfied with this chapter. Nonetheless, it serves as a primer on the damage caused when Christianity resorts to the government of creation to accomplish its mission rather than operating within its proper sphere, the government of redemption.

are willing into the exercise of power out of a desire to maintain its privilege and to avoid the unpleasantness of radical change.

¹⁹ Stark observes, “Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.” Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997), 161. All of this was accomplished several centuries before the Edict of Milan in AD 313.

THE BATTLE OF THE FLESH

The third chapter is a provocative critique of what I have termed *comfortable Christianity*. “The Battle of the Flesh is Christianity’s resistance to lawlessness for the sake of its own comfort and stability” (p. 65). This chapter develops a theme introduced in the previous chapter.²⁰ It likens cultural changes to weight resistance exercises that strengthen and build muscles. Christians who resist cultural changes grow weak in the faith.

It was surprising to read “the undoing of the rich fool who built bigger barns was that he tried to insulate himself from change. And in that, his attitude was inconsistent with life” (p. 66).²¹ This is an unfortunate illustration of Fraser’s point since the parable was addressed to the Pharisees to warn them of the danger posed by their love of money (Luke 16:14).²² A more apt illustration may have been drawn from the conflict over whether Gentiles should be required to adopt aspects of Jewish culture in order to be recognized as equal members with Jews in the Church.

There is merit to Fraser’s view that we should expect God to facilitate His messengers’ movement abroad so His name will be declared throughout the earth (p. 72). Movement is less likely when life is comfortable and stable. Political oppression, environmental disaster, and economic hardship motivate migration, serving the Lord’s purposes. It is shortsighted and self-centered to imagine

²⁰ He states, “our zeal to resist the ‘de-Christianizing’ of society too often arises out of our desire for continuity and stability” (p. 53). To that one may add the desire for ease.

²¹ Although Fraser does not provide the citation, this is a reference to the teaching on Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31.

²² Bock reads this as a warning to the disciples that wealth in this life does not translate to wealth in the next. Therefore, disciples of means should take care to be generous with those of lesser means. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 3rd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1361. See also R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth, Volume II* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1998), 156 and John Noland, *Luke 9:21-18:34 Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35B* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 828.

that God is mainly interested in creating governments that allow prosperity, security, and comfort. History shows that this kind of environment entices God's people to become preoccupied with their own comfort. In Fraser's view it is unfortunate that Christianity has marshalled its resources to protect its turf rather than moving forward into unreached corners of postmodern culture.

THE BATTLE OF THE SOUL

This enlightening chapter begins with Christianity's unrealistic demand that the unregenerate must keep the law (p. 76).²³ It ends with a trenchant critique of evangelists who require the natural man to acknowledge the law, something of which he is incapable. He notes that the natural man is not in the position of having rejected spiritual truth after careful consideration. Rather, "he *cannot* [his emphasis] weigh them or even recognize them" (p. 77).

His argument errantly asserts that there are but two spiritual conditions: Spirit-filled or unregenerate (p. 78). Perhaps he intended to write "Spirit-indwelt," but if not then we ask, what of the carnal believer who is indwelt by but not filled with the Spirit? Are there not at least three spiritual categories (unregenerate, Spirit-indwelt, and Spirit-filled)?

Free Grace adherents will particularly appreciate Fraser's pungent evaluation of popular evangelistic techniques:

Christianity's confusion about the spiritual capabilities of the natural man is also evident in its approach to evangelism...The natural man has only one spiritual transaction available to him and required of him: to believe in Jesus

²³I assume that "law" in this context refers to the Law of Moses.

Christ according to the gift of faith God provides him (p. 83).²⁴

Since the unregenerate man is not capable of grasping the array of legal transactions that often comprise the traditional evangelistic offer, Fraser rightly turns a critical eye on six common mistakes in evangelism (pp. 84-90). The requirements often included within the typical evangelistic presentation are “forms of ‘pre-discipleship’” (p. 83):

1. Recognize you have sinned.
2. Confess your sin to Jesus.
3. Ask forgiveness.
4. Ask Him to help you turn away from your old life, and commit to doing so.
5. Ask the Lord into your life, to be in control and guide you.
6. Determine to follow him [sic], through the direction of His Spirit and the study of His Word.

Helpful discussion is included under each of these points. Fraser observes that imposing such conditions in any presentation of the gospel indicates a seriously deficient understanding of grace and a failure to understand the limits of the natural man’s spiritual discernment (pp. 90-91). They may result in a needless challenge to one’s assurance as they easily lead to the notion that the status of one’s adoption depends on remaining continually faithful (p.91). Many of them are conditions of discipleship, not of salvation.²⁵

I appreciated his view on the means of salvation: “A person only becomes a Christian through his act of belief”

²⁴ It is not clear what Fraser means by “the gift of faith” in this context. I suspect that he is referring to the Reformed doctrine of the same name. See my comments in the conclusion about Fraser’s use of this and other Reformed doctrines.

²⁵ E.g., he notes that asking God for forgiveness is something available to those who are already regenerate, and that this is an obligation on the believer (p. 87).

(p.89).²⁶ Free Grace adherents will profit by reading and considering Fraser’s analysis of the typical gospel presentation.

THE BATTLE OF THE MIND

After the previous strong chapter, this one disappoints. It tackles a subject of considerable contemporary interest but displays a lack of careful exegesis and a weak understanding of anthropology. The subject, Christianity’s efforts to answer postmodernism’s rational objections to the law, is important in our postmodern environment and should interest anyone engaged in the missionary task.

Fraser expresses concern that apologetics may be a fool’s errand today: “My concern is not with postmodernism’s shallow contrivance, but rather with Christianity’s all too willing readiness to play at this game” (p. 96). In Fraser’s view the argument is lost before it begins because:

When [Christianity] submits its confession to the scrutiny of empirical examination, Christianity accepts by default postmodernism’s assertion that such an assessment by the rational mind is a legitimate enterprise (p. 96).

He devalues the utility of an apologetic response to postmodern culture (p. 93). Apologetics is valuable when speaking to “genuine seekers” but it is of little or no value in speaking to the unregenerate mind. He reads Peter’s

²⁶ Unfortunately, he sees belief as an act of the will rather than a state of the mind. The participial clauses in Rom 4:20-21 indicate that faith is a matter of conviction, not volition. See Fred Chay and John Correia, *The Faith that Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 2008); Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 96; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 214; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38a (Dallas: Word, 2002), 222; Rene Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, Mo: 21st Century, 2005), 95. Lopez’s observation speaks directly to the matter when he writes, “Finally Paul defines Abraham’s faith as **being fully convinced**” [emphasis his].

instruction (he provides no citation but this is an obvious reference to 1 Pet 3:15) as lacking any justification for addressing skeptics and critics on a rational level (p. 94). His statement that “by their very nature, these interactions can never lead to faith in Christ” (p. 94) neglects ample evidence to the contrary.²⁷

The effort is fruitless, in Fraser’s view, because “Christianity’s efforts to justify the faith to the rational mind use tools that were never intended to perform that task” (p. 96). He relies on an anthropology that is unre-
fined, even for a book written for the lay audience.

For example, he contends that the physical senses, which are useful in measuring the physical world, are of little value in perceiving spiritual truth; the eyes are particularly useless. “Throughout the Bible, the eyes represent human self-determination and independence, as opposed to submission to God” (p. 96). In his view hearing is the primary means by which one obtains spiritual insight, a thought derived from his understanding of Rom 10:9-10 (p. 97).

I want to extend benefit of the doubt because he writes to a lay audience. But it is hard to understand his neglect of a wealth of Biblical data in which the eyes do play an important role in understanding and believing spiritual truth²⁸ and texts which indicate that hearing is no more reliable in accessing spiritual truth than any other faculty.²⁹ His failure to reference Biblical passages that

²⁷ Lee Strobel comes to mind as one who came to faith as his barriers to faith were dismantled, one by one, through a process of research and evaluation that he honed in his many years as a legal reporter for *The Chicago Tribune*. See Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) and Strobel’s bio page at <http://www.leestrobel.com/Bio.php>. Accessed February 2, 2011.

²⁸ Matthew 5:16; 11:4; 13:16; Mark 4:12; 8:18; Luke 9:27; and John 9:39 all show a link between seeing with the eyes and either believing or disbelieving. The problem is not that the eye is unsuited for perceiving items of spiritual significance. Rather, the problem is with the heart that either believes (“sees”) or not (“does not see”). In Matt 13:15 Jesus comments on the interplay between sight, hearing, and an unbelieving heart.

²⁹ Mark 4:12.

speak directly to his point (the natural man's inability to understand spiritual matters) significantly weakens his argument and the value of this chapter.³⁰

THE BATTLE OF THE PRESENT

This chapter opens with a statement of a subject that is neglected in the ensuing pages. "The Battle of the Present is Christianity's effort to exalt the benefits of law in this life by criticising [sic] postmodern culture" (p. 107). What follows is a cogent critique of the "life-is-better-with-Jesus gospel" that characterizes consumer Christianity. The connection between the chapter's subject matter and its contents is not readily apparent.

Fraser is accurate in his assertion that "during the second half of the 20th century, however, Christianity significantly transformed its message into a life-is-better-with-Jesus gospel" that exalts potential side effects above the central truth of eternal life.³¹ He rightly insists, "The central truth of the gospel is that death has been defeated and that all of these other blessings follow in the wake of Christ's victory" (p. 108).

When we present Christ as a cure-all elixir instead of as God's answer to the sting of death, we surrender our most powerful tool for a weaker one. The Holy Spirit empowers the gospel offer of eternal life (p. 109). The offer of a better life with Jesus is spiritually impotent and in fact suffers from several significant shortcomings. Among them is the fact that this defective gospel must convince people that they are unhappy and unfulfilled (p. 109). When the gospel is offered as a life improvement, it must compete with other solutions, many of which may offer genuine benefit (p. 110). Further, it is not an ineluctable

³⁰ E.g., 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:3-4.

³¹ Side effects noted by the author (p. 108) include material and financial blessing, improved physical and psychological health, wholesome relationships and, where the faith becomes widespread, a just and prosperous nation.

truth that one's life in this world will improve when one believes in Jesus (p. 112). Christians face potential discrimination at work, a loss of friends and family relationships and ridicule by the world. Finally, this approach to the gospel offers people what they crave rather than what they actually need (p. 113).

He ends this chapter with a lengthy exposition of the mistake we make in thinking that we always know what we need. Although his points are well taken, they are really not necessary. Enumerating and briefly describing the faults of the life-is-better-with-Jesus gospel made his point.

This chapter should motivate us to evaluate our gospel presentations. Aside from the fact that the material in the chapter seems unrelated to its stated theme, it is relevant, accurate, and worth consideration.

THE BATTLE OF THE WORLD

This chapter addresses those voices within the Christian community that engage the postmodern culture over a variety of issues: "The Battle of the World is Christianity's reactionary application of the law to the postmodern agenda" (p. 122). This battle is joined when Christian organizations resort to the law to discover and declare God's view on any given subject of public interest (p. 123).³²

This is a fruitless task for at least four reasons. First, Christians fail to appreciate the degree to which bias and their own "local horizons" govern what we think are God's opinions (p. 123).³³ Second, the Bible's central teaching on many significant topics often consists of a set of

³² One presumes that by "law" Fraser refers to the Law of Moses and the discipleship teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

³³ He urges the reader to "trace any particular issue back through the history of Christian thought—even ten or twenty years—and you will see how strongly a generation's particular cultural lenses color its views."

contrasting thoughts (p. 123).³⁴ Wrestling with these contrasts is often the process by which the Holy Spirit guides us in our path.³⁵ A third reason why declaring the mind of God on any given public issue is fruitless is because “the government of creation will not allow the government of redemption to impose the grid of the law over its affairs” (p. 124).³⁶

Fourth and finally, attempts to speak for God in the public square are useless because Jesus Himself ignored the battlefields chosen by the world (p. 124). By way of example the author cites the question of paying taxes to Caesar, which was cast in terms intended to force Jesus to declare His political sympathies.³⁷ In similar fashion the postmodern world attempts to force Christians into certain labels, thereby channeling the message into categories of the world’s choosing (p. 125).³⁸ Christianity will only regain its prophetic voice if it ignores the postmodern world’s attempt to neatly categorize the faith (p. 132).

There is an interesting internal contradiction within this chapter that significantly weakens his argument. Fraser calls on Christianity to avoid a “reactionary application of the law to the postmodern agenda” (p. 122) and yet the Biblical examples he cites as worthy of emulation—Samuel (p. 128), Isaiah (pp. 129-30), and Nehemiah (p. 133)—did the very thing Fraser says we should not do.

³⁴ He cites, e.g., that money can be both a blessing and a snare or that God directs our paths but we must choose our steps wisely.

³⁵ Often the Holy Spirit may guide two people to different decisions over the same issue. Therefore we must hold our personal conclusions loosely and allow others to hold views that contrast with ours.

³⁶ According to the author, a Christian has the right of petitioning the government but in advocating for justice “he may not appeal to God’s absolute law without incurring an immediate negative reaction.” This lies at the root of the Church versus State conflict being waged on many fronts today.

³⁷ Matthew 22:15-22.

³⁸ It is interesting to note that in an Author’s Note on page vii Fraser eschews the label “Evangelical” because it has been “abducted by network election reporting, wherein it is increasingly pressed into service to identify a voting bloc rather than a theological position.” I stopped using this term to describe myself quite some time ago.

They spoke God's law to their culture and their society. Saul is the only one who spoke to a foreign culture (the Hellenists and the God fearers), but Fraser fails to show us how Saul managed to bear a redemptive message without resorting to the law.³⁹

THE BATTLE OF THE LAW

By its title this chapter promises to be of great interest to Free Grace people. It opens with a crisp statement of the subject. "The Battle of the Law is Christianity's insistence on presenting the gospel exclusively in terms of a legal reconciliation with God" (p. 136). Free Grace people will find his argument short of theological accuracy, but will find his analysis of the good news/bad news gospel hitting the bulls-eye.

He begins with the observation that the apostles needed to address two groups, Jews and Gentiles. The Gentile worldview was devoid of any concept of legal separation from God. In this regard the postmodern worldview is like the Gentile worldview (p. 137).

Christianity enters an evangelistic encounter with postmodernism from a weak position. The typical gospel presentation that revolves around the bad news of separation from God by sin and the good news about the legal remedy in Jesus (p. 137). By framing the gospel offer in this way we use terms and concepts that fall on deaf ears because they answer a question not being asked and offer a solution to a problem not perceived (p. 139): "A lawless society does not see sin as a problem" (p. 138).

Fraser advocates the idea that our gospel presentation is on solid ground when we speak to the universal human dilemma, death:

It is far preferable to present the good news of
Jesus Christ as the answer to the tragedy of

³⁹I am not arguing that Paul used the Law in his evangelistic message to those without the Law. I merely point out that Fraser failed to demonstrate his case.

death that is universally recognized and avoid arguing about the problem of sin with those who do not have the law (p. 141).

This avoids the need to win arguments about sin before getting to the main point. It also dovetails nicely with Jesus' words to Nicodemus that all are in danger of perishing, but eternal life is freely available to those who believe.⁴⁰

Fraser's approach dovetails nicely with John 1:29 and 1 John 2:2. The gospel is the good news that Jesus offers eternal life in place of death (p. 142). Unfortunately, Fraser surrenders the high ground by allowing that in some cases the use of the law in evangelism may still be an effective tool.⁴¹

At this point Fraser advances a provocative thought that intersects the contentious "crossless gospel" debate.⁴² He cuts to the heart of the issue by noting the difference between the gift (eternal life) and the legal transaction (the crucifixion) that makes the gift possible (pp. 142-43). "God only requires that a person believe in Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life, not that he believe rightly about his own sin" (p. 144). Although he is speaking to the problem of bearing witness in a postmodern society, this also answers the question of how much one needs to know and believe in order to be saved. His answer? "People do not first require a theological overview of redemption, reconciliation and justification in order to believe in Jesus for eternal life" (p. 144).⁴³

⁴⁰ John 3:16-18.

⁴¹ "Where it encounters those under the law, Christianity can certainly appeal to the problem of sin and the separation from God it imposes. But this legal argument is a tool necessarily restricted to those having the law" (p. 146). Fortunately, he attenuates this statement by reminding the reader that this is not the gospel message itself.

⁴² See Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee, WI: Grace Gospel Press, 2009); Lou Martuneac, *In Defense of the Gospel: Biblical Answers to Lordship Salvation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006).

⁴³ It is unclear whether Fraser arrived at this formulation himself or if he is reflecting his understanding of Zane Hodges's writing on this issue. See

This distinction between the gift and the legal basis of the offer is helpful. If one were to ask Fraser “Which Jesus Christ? The Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus of the Mormon Church, or some other Jesus?” I suspect he would reply “whichever Jesus it is that gives eternal life.” His point is that knowledge of the basis of Jesus’ offer is not necessary so there’s no reason to belabor the issue.⁴⁴

Although this chapter is thin on exegesis, it does offer an illustration that illuminates the point. Fraser posits someone of meager financial means in need of an extremely expensive medication in order to be cured. A complete stranger hears of the patient’s plight and purchases the medication. The only thing required of the patient is to assent to the treatment. The cure depends upon knowing neither the cost of the medication nor the identity of the benefactor (p. 143).

In summary, this chapter will reward a careful reading by those in the Free Grace camp. The author accurately identifies the gospel and cuts the Gordian knot tied by those who needlessly fear a “crossless gospel.”⁴⁵

note 44.

⁴⁴ Alternately, Fraser’s use of the full title *Jesus Christ* may signal his agreement with Hodges’s gravely misunderstood article, which makes plain that to believe that Jesus gives eternal life is to believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God. See Zane Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* vol. 22, no. 42 (Spring 2009), 104-114. Surely Fraser would agree with Hodges assertion that “we are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus” (Hodges, “How to Lead, Part 1,” 107).

⁴⁵ Attempting to define the “minimal content of saving faith” creates an intractable problem for those who presume to write the definition. Fraser’s insight into the distinction between the gift and the legal transaction that makes the gift possible cuts neatly to the heart of the issue by reminding us that we are called to believe the promise, not to understand the transaction that makes the promise possible.

THE BATTLE OF BEING RIGHT

Chapter nine focuses on “Christianity’s preoccupation with exposing the errors of lawlessness” which Fraser identifies with the Lord’s warning in Rev 2:1-7 (p. 147). He finds similarities between contemporary Christianity and the church at Ephesus.

“Ephesus did not leave its first love through a conscious decision on any particular day that could be distinguished from a thousand days preceding it,” but slowly, with the passage of time and through countless struggles over false doctrine, the church became a “culture of opposition” (p. 148). Like many conservative churches in our day, Ephesus eventually became known for the lawlessness it opposed rather than the life-giving message it affirmed.

Fraser’s perspective may receive a cool welcome among those who view apologetics and political activism as important to being salt and light in a corrupt and darkening world. But Fraser is correct: refuting error, while necessary and proper, should never become our primary identity. “Certainly Christianity must always oppose evil and falsehood in its own house if its spiritual life is to be preserved, but that struggle is not the life itself” (p. 149). When a church finds its agenda dominated by refuting error and resisting evil, usurping the celebration and declaration of life in Christ, it has become an Ephesian church. It has lost its first love.

His analysis of why this happens so frequently reveals Fraser’s pastoral experience:

What typically happens to lead Christians into this error is a confrontation with their own ineffectiveness. There could be any one of a hundred reasons for this ineffectiveness, but that point is that they realize they are not transforming the world around them. In fact, they are watching society decline before their eyes and feel powerless to slow the awful momentum. It is precisely in the midst of this attitude that

Christianity is susceptible to making a subtle shift in its mission (p. 154).⁴⁶

This chapter ends with a word of caution and a word of comfort. The caution is to remember that “Christianity’s former designation as society’s lawgiver is passed away and will not be restored...” (p. 156). Christianity must look forward to the future rather than continue battling to resurrect the past. But even the lost battles aren’t ultimately lost; they will be won in another era. “The tragedy in waging the battle of *Being Right* [his emphasis] is not the loss of the battle itself, for some lost battles have their vindication in the final balance of victory” (p. 157). The tragedy is a failure to reclaim our first love once we recognize the world as it is and forsake the desire to be right in the world’s eyes.

THE BATTLE OF THE FUTURE

Fraser says that “The Battle of the Future is Christianity’s expectation that those without the law will come into the visible community of the law” (p. 158). This concluding chapter recognizes that the paradigm that governs how Christianity evangelizes is based on a flawed premise.

Before addressing that issue, the chapter opens with the observation that Jesus had a clear goal in mind but seemed to operate without a fixed strategy. He lived and worked in the moment, ministering and teaching as opportunities were presented. From this Fraser draws an application for those who tend to be focused on the future

⁴⁶ I concur. I serve with an organization that has provided interim pastoral leadership for over one hundred churches across the United States. Invariably churches end up in serious trouble because a series of incremental moves away from the Biblical mission leave them without direction and purpose. We frequently see “mission creep” in official church records. It is common for pastors and leadership boards to subtly redefine “success” to match the results of a failed effort. It is rare to find a pastor or a leadership board that has the courage to face the fact that they have lost touch with the community and become irrelevant in the local culture.

and oriented toward goals and objectives. He counsels us to accept the fact that spontaneous encounters are the venues in which most evangelism is carried out (p. 159).

He illustrates his point by drawing on an analogy between evangelism and fishing. Fishing is based on “blind expectation” (p. 160). The fisherman casts his nets into the water but he cannot see the fish nor can he pick out any particular fish. He then moves into a lengthy discussion about the distinction between fishing and hunting to build his case for an “in the moment” way of living (pp. 160-63). His point is apt, but his case is weakened by a tedious analogy when a brief discussion of Prov 16:9 would have sufficed.

The real value in this chapter arrives with the observation that Christianity is most effective when it “infiltrates the world through the silent, discreet and imperceptible dispersal of individual Christians into the fabric of society” (pp. 163-64). Just as an individual seed grows when sown in isolation, as salt is palatable by the grain or as yeast leavens when kneaded throughout the lump, so evangelism is most effective when believers disperse. The Church is least effective when it mounts coordinated visible campaigns in society (p. 164).

As he develops this thought Fraser reveals an acquaintance with Missional Church literature.⁴⁷ He touches on an important theme when he scores modern Christianity in America for “destinational evangelism” (p. 166). Contrary to Jesus’ model of dispersing into the world, Christians prefer to gather and engage in “attractional” evangelism.⁴⁸

Fraser sees destination evangelism as a serious strategic error in a postmodern culture. Because the church

⁴⁷ The lack of a bibliography or footnotes makes it impossible to declare definitively that Fraser has read the Missional Church literature. If he hasn’t then his thinking is similar to Missional Church thought.

⁴⁸ “Attractional” is a key term in the Missional Church literature. It describes the paradigm that relies on drawing the unchurched to church services or church events where they will be exposed to the gospel. The “attractional church” is the paradigmatic opposite of the Missional Church.

is viewed as a “community of law” by those who inhabit a lawless culture or hold to a lawless worldview, the invitation will fall on deaf ears.⁴⁹ Tinkering with the basic formula to create worship services that will be more appealing to the postmodern cannot solve the problem.⁵⁰ Although Christianity enjoyed a period of success with the attractional model—because the culture temporarily embraced natural law and a binding morality—that period has passed and will not return.

In spite of the ineffective analogy on pp. 160-63, this is an excellent chapter. It achieves its goal of explaining why it is fruitless for Christianity to expect that those without the law will enter a community of law. Those within the Free Grace camp should appreciate his perspective about the wisdom of expecting anyone to embrace a community of law. Those in the Missional Church movement will agree that it is time to discard the destinal model of evangelistic events to embrace the dispersed model of individual Christians living in moment-by-moment reliance on the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Fraser’s purpose in writing was to persuade us that the model of a visibly activist, culturally dominant Christianity is not practical, necessary, or even possible and to urge Christianity to forsake its use of politics and law when it speaks to the culture. If we bear in mind that this is a book for a lay audience rather than a scholarly essay, then he has fulfilled his purpose.

⁴⁹ By “lawless” Fraser means those who reject the notion of transcendent law that applies to all people in all places at all times. It also refers to those who reject absolute moral standards of conduct.

⁵⁰ Although Fraser does not make this point, it is important to note that this is a crucial distinction between the Missional Church and the emerging church. The emerging church is simply another form of the attractional model; the only thing that has changed is the liturgy or the program formulation. The traditional church and the emerging church both rely on their program offerings to attract people to their gatherings, they are simply targeting different groups.

Free Grace adherents will profit by reading this book and will likely recommend it to others. It is unlikely, however, that knowledgeable Free Grace people will endorse the book without a caveat for lay readers.

There are areas in which Fraser attenuates his grace-friendly perspectives with Reformed doctrines. This detracts from the power of his book. For example, he sees the church as a “community of law.” In the introduction he writes, “Christianity has [a mandate] to commend the law to those who have the Holy Spirit...” (p. ix). His use of the doctrines of prevenient grace (p. 130)⁵¹ and the gift of faith (pp. 83, 192) should signal caution. Pastors who recommend this book (and they should) will want to prepare their flock for these discordant notes.

All things considered, I found the book enjoyable if occasionally frustrating, a source of fresh illumination on Free Grace thought, and a book worth recommending.

⁵¹ Editor’s note: While prevenient grace is normally associated with Arminians, not Calvinists, it is likely that Fraser holds that prevenient grace cannot be resisted (the *I* in TULIP stands for *irresistible grace*).