

OVERCOMING THE SCANDAL OF THE CHRISTIAN MIND

Review of *How Now Shall We Live?* By Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey

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First Things 100 (February 2000), pp. 52-56

In 1993, when *Washington Post* writer Michael Weisskopf issued his notorious declaration that evangelicals are "largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command," conservative Protestant intellectuals were quick to call his bluff. Yet only a year later, when historian Mark Noll, himself a conservative Protestant, published a book called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, it was widely greeted by his coreligionists not with cries of "Scoundrel!" and "Traitor!" but the murmur, "Alas, 'tis true."

Both reactions were correct. In general, evangelicals are neither stupid, backward, nor ignorant. But there is something wrong with the historical development of the evangelical mind, something that the best evangelical minds are the first to acknowledge. It is a theological defect: not exactly an error, but a lopsidedness, a prodigious development of one divine gift coupled with the atrophy of another. The prodigy is our devotion to "special revelation," which God has particularly disclosed to believers in His word. The atrophy is our near ignorance of "general revelation," which He has promiscuously divulged to mankind in the very order of His creation. We know a great deal about saving grace, but next to nothing--though it is one of our doctrines--about common grace.

This lopsidedness has two crippling consequences. It hinders us not only in explaining divine truth to people who are unimpressed by Scripture, but in applying it to matters that Scripture does not explicitly address. Perhaps I am sensitive to the problem because I spend time around college students, who are a cultural magnifying glass. Surrounded by neopagans, young evangelicals have no idea how to translate biblical concepts into language that friends and hostile teachers can understand. Worse, there are whole continents of life in which their faith does not function at all. The cables just haven't been connected. A bright, Bible-minded student may be able to discourse learnedly about what Paul said to the Ephesians, but if you ask him to explain what the triune God has to do with his intended profession of biochemistry, engineering, or commercial law, he comes to a dead stop. None of those things are in his Bible's concordance.

The ambition of Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey is to do something about this lopsidedness, to strike a blow against the scandal of the evangelical mind--in fact against the scandal of the *Christian* mind, for they see non-Protestants as equally far of the mark, though presumably for different reasons. And so they write:

The Church's singular failure in recent decades has been the failure to see Christianity as a life system, or worldview, that governs every area of existence. ... [W]e cannot answer the

questions our children bring home from school, so we are incapable of preparing them to meet the challenges they face. ... We cannot explain to our friends and neighbors why we believe, and we often cannot defend our faith. And we do not know how to organize our lives correctly.

Their goal, then, is to integrate saving grace with common grace, to fuse special revelation with general, to regain a prospect of "the sovereignty of the triune God over the whole cosmos, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible"--for they insist that "the entire cosmos can be understood only in relation to God."

That's a tall order, and to make it taller, they want to do these things in a way that ordinary people can understand. That conservative Christians are "uneducated" is a cliche, but that not all of them are theologians is simply fact. Colson and Pearcey are not so much trying to light a fire under Christian scholars (although that would please them) as to contribute something to the overall renovation of Christian culture--right down to the people in the pews. To this tall task, they bring an unusual combination of talents.

Colson is a remarkable innovator. A former Nixon aide, he pleaded guilty to charges arising from Watergate. Converted shortly afterward to Christ, he served out his appointed time, then founded the celebrated international ministry Prison Fellowship (along with its subsidiaries Justice Fellowship, Neighbors Who Care, and Wilberforce Forum). He is equally well-known through his many books and his daily *BreakPoint* radio broadcasts. Readers of *First Things* know Colson as one of the original contributors to "The End of Democracy?" symposium, and as co-convenor, with Father Richard John Neuhaus, of the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" discussions.

Pearcey, a razor-sharp Christian intellectual who first studied at L'Abri under Francis Schaeffer, is an equally prolific writer. Coauthor, with Charles Thaxton, of *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, she has contributed to numerous other books and journals, including *First Things*. A fellow of the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture, and managing editor of the journal *Origins and Design*, she is a longtime collaborator with Colson in *BreakPoint*, in a monthly column in *Christianity Today*, and in *Wilberforce Forum*, for which she directs policy. (By the way, although marketed on the "superstar" model that dominates evangelical publishing--itself a scandal to the evangelical mind--*How Now Shall We Live?* is a true collaboration: not "Colson with Pearcey," but "Colson and Pearcey.")

Though unfolded over nearly 600 pages, the basic strategy of the book is simple. As we all know, Christianity understands the world through a story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. At first glance this story seems completely unrelated to the other stories and philosophies by which people try to make sense of the world. Aristotle didn't believe in creation; New Agers don't believe in the fall; postmodernists don't believe in redemption. There really is a connection among those stories, but in structure, not content. Creation, fall, and redemption are the distinctively Christian answers to the three questions that face them all: 1) Who are we and where did we come from? 2) What's wrong with the world? 3) How can it be fixed?

Colson and Pearcey use these three questions as a "grid" to break up and analyze the worldviews with which Christianity is in conflict. This comparative analysis prepares them to show that no other worldview fits the structure of created reality as well. In the last part of the volume, they apply the results of their discussion to the restoration of our fast-collapsing culture.

A limitation of Colson and Pearcey's creation-fall-redemption "grid" is that by itself, it is just a set of rubrics, not a theory. It needs to be filled out. The authors realize this, and are willing to borrow stuffing from any plausible source. Of course that whets the appetite to find out their sources, and in anticipation of this curiosity, they name them up front. After Scripture, the chief influences turn out to be John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, and C. S. Lewis: Calvin, two Calvinists, and an Anglican.

Calvin, of course, gave preeminence to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Kuyper emphasized that Christianity is a total life-and-world view, and his influence is evident on every page. Schaeffer's appearance on the list is a bit of a surprise because of his presuppositionalism (i. e. , the belief that once we reach the bedrock assumptions of someone's worldview, there is nothing deeper to which we can appeal). However, he was pivotal in teaching a generation of evangelicals just what is at stake in the culture wars: not a hodgepodge of discrete issues, but a single contest on many fronts, the outcome of which will determine which of several competing worldviews will prevail.

C. S. Lewis, I think, influences Colson and Pearcey in a number of ways. First, he is the great proponent of an apologetics based on "mere" Christianity rather than this or that brand of Christianity; Colson and Pearcey criticize sectarianism, and work hard to speak in terms that will be acceptable to the broadest possible variety of Christians. Second, Lewis is a model for Christian "public" scholars because of his willingness to adapt his means to his end, writing in many styles, genres, and venues in order to get the point across.

Third, Lewis is an informal conduit for the influence of the natural law tradition. For Catholics--as well as for Protestants who have kept up contact with their Catholic past--natural law has been the principal vehicle for reflection upon general revelation. Though Calvin accepted the natural law, he did not make much of it--for fear, perhaps, of obscuring the depravity of the mind. Among most of his heirs, the tradition has languished. Some even oppose it as a de facto denial of the fall, a neo-Scholastic treason more in debt to Aristotle than to Jesus Christ. I believe that this is a misunderstanding, and the Colson and Pearcey project would have been impoverished had it enjoyed no access to this great river of thought. Lewis--who, like the authors, only rarely refers to natural law by its proper name--is in many ways its ideal missionary, not only for laypeople who have never heard of it and for scholars leery of its Scholastic form, but also for specialists who have forgotten its roots in common sense. The authors have drunk deeply from his well.

What impresses me greatly about the book is the felicity of its popular rhetoric--its sense of audience, its wealth of illustration, and its happy marriage of anecdote, analysis, and reflection. A highly intelligent book, it is not ashamed to speak to ordinary folk. Of course it will not please those of dainty taste. The organization is loose, the stream meanders, the stories are

sometimes schmaltzy. But greater writers than we could be schmaltzy when there was a reason to be, and I am not so sure that a meandering stream is less refreshing than a ship canal.