

**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

## **The Case Against the R-Rated Church**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Hello, I'm Phil Johnson, Executive Director of Grace To You and I'm in the studio today with Pastor and Bible Teacher John MacArthur. Hello, John.

JOHN: Hi, Phil, great to be with you again.

PHIL: Let's get right to it. We're calling this interview, "The Case Against the R-Rated Church." What do we mean when we say "The R-Rated Church?"

JOHN: Well who'd have thought, right? The R-Rated church...staggering. Now what do we mean by that? How about this, "Foul, coarse language in the pulpit, sexually explicit language in the pulpit, cheap jokes about sacred things, overt sexual references making public what should be private, aggressive, purposeful integration of pop-culture I think at its basest level and secular entertainment at its basest level into the worship service. I think it begs the point that it's not even possible to consider it a worship service.

And then you have the amazing trend on sex-oriented challenge programs, where you have pastors telling their people they need to have sex every day for 30 days, or sex every day for 14 days, or sex every day for seven days. This is supposed to transform their marital life. These are the kinds of things that are common place, much more than most of us would ever realize. And some of you out there are saying, "Are you kidding me?" And we would tell you, if you were to look on the Internet and got to watch...probably don't do that, you would be shocked at the explicit nature of these kinds of things that are running rampant in the name of the church.

PHIL: Yeah, especially in the Christian districts of the Internet where you think you might be safe.

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: In a similar vein, I noticed four times over the past year, at least four different times, there have been news stories about different churches who have had these series on sex, or sex challenges, that sort of thing, and advertised it with billboards that have created a stir in the community, and people in the community who aren't even believers, are outraged at the carnality reflected in the church's advertising.

JOHN: You know, when I was flying into Dallas some months ago, I saw that Church where a massive banner stretched across the whole side of the building, "The Sexual Revolution Begins Here." That's what it said. Selling sex.

PHIL: Yeah, now this is not an isolated problem, right?

JOHN: No. It's coming clear that this is widespread. It's so widespread now, as you well know, Phil, that the public media, public journalists, public television, you know, news stations are picking up on it. It's the new...it's the new attraction in the church from a media standpoint. This is hot stuff when the church sort of joins the pornographic trend.

PHIL: Yeah, we looked at a couple of news items about this trend and the interesting thing is that most of these news accounts actually express a degree of shock that churches would stoop to this level.

JOHN: Yeah, I think, you know, traditionally there is a certain sense about the dignity, the propriety, that a church should manifest. And I think those kinds of sensibilities are part of our society, part of our culture, and I think it does shock non-believing people to see churches sink to this level.

PHIL: Well it certainly shocks me. If you had said to me five years ago that we would have a conversation like this, I would have thought, "That's crazy, it will never get to that point."

JOHN: People always ask me the question, "What's the next trend?" You know, "Where is it going, and what's going to be the next issue?" No matter how many times I've been asked that question in the past, I could never have comprehended that the church would embrace the pornographic movement. I have in my hand an article called, "A Proposal For Christian Pornography." Christian pornography? This is by some spiritual leader, some church, some evangelical, right? And he says Christian pornography is going to be good because when we do Christian pornography, you know, we're going to help couples have better sex life. But there are some rules for Christian pornography. This Christian pornography must be uplifting, inspirational, focusing on strengthening Christian marriage and Christian faith...and oh, by the way, no profanity is allowed.

PHIL: Wow.

JOHN: Those are the rules for the correct use, it says, of Christian pornography.

PHIL: Wow, now I'm shocked like you and you say you really didn't see this coming, but the fact is, let me play for you something you said 30 years ago where I think you saw this tendency in its mildest form and decried it even then. This is from more than 30 years ago, your series on Ephesians 5, here's what you said.

"We live in an age when fornication or sexual sin is rampant. You wouldn't be adverse to call this society 'The Sexy Seventies.' We are inundated, drowned, preoccupied and our senses are dulled to the potency of the attack that comes against us and it's a tragic thing because it affects the church. We have sex madness, I'm afraid even in the church. It really shocks me some of the books that are now being written by Christian people, you know, Sex for Christians. I've thrown some in the trash can. I've had some books sent to me written by Christians, published by Christian publishers dealing with the issue of sex, read about three pages and pitched it in the trash. You know what's happened is, the world is selling this so effectively that the church is coming in the back door and buying some of it and sort of trying to sanctify it. You can't sanctify this. I heard one person say in his, pre-marital counseling, he advised the couple to see each other naked before they were married so that they would have some idea of what they were getting into. Ludicrous. This isn't something clinical that can be dealt with in that fashion. There are some who even suggested pre-marital sex relationships for Christians before they're married."

JOHN: That's pretty good, 30 years ago I said all of that?

PHIL: Yeah, I think you were reacting to books that were....

JOHN: Oh I know, there was a wave of those books, I remember the books. But, you know, it has its little day and it went away really fast. That's not going to happen in the current environment. And I think, Phil, one of the major contributors to this in the church is that the churches in general are so full of non-Christian people. They're just filled with non-Christian people. I think many of them are quote/unquote "led by," or "pastored by" non-Christian people. I just think that the church today, we call it an evangelical church, you know, nobody would say, "I'm a liberal," people aren't promoting liberalism, neoorthodoxy, all that kind of thing. Everybody wants to be an evangelical. But I think we have within the big word "evangelical" just massive numbers of people who have no real salvation, and they're attracted to all this stuff. And you could just sanctify this, it's a perfect world for them.

PHIL: How did the church get so full of people who perhaps aren't really even Christians?

JOHN: Well, you can lay the responsibility on the negative side, you can lay it at the feet of the marketing strategy that came in in the Church-Growth Movement. In order to sell Jesus, they stripped the gospel, they became minimalists, they developed a sub-Christian gospel. Well we've said this before, you take a book like The Purpose-Driven Life. The Purpose-Driven Life selling in the tens of millions supposedly to lead people to salvation, and there is not one single mention of the doctrine of justification or the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And in order to be saved you have to believe God raised Him from the dead, Romans 10:9 and 10. So I think it is the market strategy which has minimalized the gospel, just turned it into some kind of sub-saving, oversimplified message and then I think the second element that really has produced this is connected to that and that is the idea that

we have to make non-believers comfortable in the church. So we never really deal with sin the way sin should be dealt with. And that's essential if we're going to have genuine conversion. I think popularity has been the goal and we've sold out to a damning lie as to what salvation really is for the sake of popularity.

PHIL: So you're really saying that you don't see this, the root problem here isn't merely a lack of sanctification among people who are saved, it goes back even further than that.

JOHN: No, I think genuine believers for the most part are not responsive to this. You know, there may be some immature genuine believers who can't quite figure it out, but for somebody who...who...who genuinely has been transformed, whose longings are for holy things, who is doing everything in his or her life to resist the flesh, these kinds of things seem intrusive.

Now we listened to some calls that came into the church that was promoting sex everywhere...

PHIL: Yes.

JOHN: And the people called up and Christian people called up and said, "This is outrageous, why are you doing this? You're a sex club hiding behind the name of a church." I think that's the kind of response that you might get from genuine Christians, it's intrusive, it's...it opens up areas that they know are not helpful in their own spiritual development. But I think non-believers are happy to imbibe this, happy to embrace this, people sitting in a church thinking they're Christians because they go to the church and they have warm feelings about Jesus. This is a perfect...this is a perfect kind of religion for them. I think very little different maybe than worshiping in Corinth, you know, at the pagan temple, where sex dominated the worship. We all know that from the New Testament that temple priestesses were essentially temple prostitutes and people worshiped by going and communing with the deities through having sex with a prostitute. So that's been a part of religion in the past, even in the New Testament era of pagan religion, that's always had a high level of appeal. Look at Islam. You can be a Muslim and you can have multiple wives and you can die and waiting for you if you die in the Jihad are 72 virgins on green pillows waiting for you to have eternal sex with them. You can always make religion more attractive by selling sex, that's a bigger appeal, I think, than selling celibacy. That's why there's so few priests. But I do think that works with people who are religious but never really have been transformed.

I think when the Spirit of God really transforms a heart, there are spiritual instincts that draw us away from those kinds of things because we know they pander to the flesh and they are not helpful in our spiritual growth.

PHIL: And even beyond those spiritual instincts, don't you think there's something in the conscience of every person that says "this isn't right?" Some of those phone calls we listened to were...non-

believers who were offended.

JOHN: Yeah, and that's what we were saying earlier. People are shocked that quote/unquote Christians would do this. Absolutely, I don't think you can get away from the fact that the Law of God is written in the heart, part of the Law of God, of course, is moral Law, that relates to sexual behavior. I think part of the agony and pain of our sexually liberated society is that people are dealing with such massive guilt, because although they're not violating their Christian commitment, because they're non-Christians, they are violating the Law of God written in their heart, their conscience is accusing and accusing and accusing and accusing and I think it's part of the horrendous stress and pain in unfulfillment and dissatisfaction that comes to these kinds of people. But if you can sort of aid and abet the release of that guilt by saying, "Hey, we have Christian pornography, we have sex in church." If you can work to sanctify it, you can mitigate some of that...that's naturally in people's hearts.

I mean, if the church tells you that Christian pornography is okay, and, you know, you ought to have sex every single day and reduce your marriage relationship to nothing more than a sex act, that's coming from the church, that kind of helps with whatever guilt you might be feeling.

PHIL: Yeah, now that prompts me to say this, I've dialogued with a number of people, as I know you have, who want to justify this kind of thing. And there are some standard arguments that they use to justify it. Let me throw some of those arguments at you and see how you would answer them.

One of the key ones, first of all, they would say "Well the Bible itself is R-rated, Scripture talks about sex. There are words, certain words in Scripture that you wouldn't want to read in a public venue, in the King James Version, at least." What do you say to that? I mean, the Song of Solomon talks about the marital relationship.

JOHN: I think the propriety of the Bible is clear. I don't think that there's any sentence, paragraph, or word anywhere in Scripture that in and of itself is prurient, designed to elicit lustful thoughts or lead to sin. I don't think anything in the Bible is designed to be a temptation because God cannot tempt, God is the author of Scripture, He tempts no man. That is explicitly stated in Scripture. The Bible can talk about sex because sex is a reality. You can talk about it, I can talk about it without having a prurient approach to it. Look, I've been preaching for 40 years in the pulpit and we've talked about a lot of things in the Bible in the 40 years that I've been preaching, I don't know that anybody's ever come to me when they edited my tapes in 40 years and said, "You know, this was sexually explicit, this could be read as a temptation, this was a lust-inducing statement." That is the farthest thing from my mind. I don't think anybody's ever taken anything like that out of anything I've said and I take it right out of the Scripture and explain exactly what the Bible means.

I think that's false accusation. The Bible does not do that. It does not do that. In fact, the Scripture speaks about matters that are sexual in a very general way, or in a very, very veiled way. Now you brought up the Song of Solomon, so I need to mention that.

Song of Solomon is a wonderful, wonderful gift from God. It is a book in which God celebrates the physical joys of marriage, clearly that is it. And it's so important that it was there because it would be...you take Song of Solomon out and there might be some dialogue about how much you should enjoy your partner, your wife, right? We could be...we could be tempted to be a little bit prudish about that, but Song of Solomon just blows that prudishness up because it has all these expressions of the joy of the physicality of your spouse. It talks about the beauty of form, the handsome desirability of the man and the beauty and desirability of the woman in veiled terms. I like to think about...I like to think of the Song of Solomon as this beautiful, beautiful veiled statement in which you talk only in analogies and only in metaphors, you know, your hair is black like goat's hair, and you know, your eyes are like pools and your breasts are like a deer, or whatever it is. I don't think the idea is that there's a one-to-one correspondence there. That doesn't make sense.

It's simply that he sees in life the beauty of creation, the beauty of nature, the beauty of the Garden, the flowers and the trees and she sees the same. And it's all those physical beauties and delights and joys that are metaphorically used to describe what is never really described at all, and the reason the explicit aspect of their relationship and love is never described because it is never intended to be anything but private. And I think the greatest statement on the privacy of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, the greatest statement on that in the Bible is the Song of Solomon because God veils the whole entire thing. You never get past the metaphors, you never get past the analogies, you never get past the word pictures which don't have a one-to-one correspondence but are rather general kinds of things, feelings about something beautiful, and something lovely and something flowing and moving and all of that.

So to say the Song of Solomon is erotic is absolutely ridiculous. To say that it is sensual is ridiculous if you mean by that that it's somehow sexually explicit because it is just the opposite. And recently I addressed this issue because there are people who try to turn the Song of Solomon into an erotic explicit sexual book taking liberties that are not found in the text, reading their own pornographic ideas into the text and I called it The Rape of Song of Solomon because what was done was like a rape, you ripped the beautiful poetic dress, you ripped the beautiful imagery off and you leave the book stark and naked and I don't think that does justice to the intent of it, I think that's a brutal way to treat Song of Solomon, because I think the Bible always is veiled, always general and when it gets into the beauty of the man and the woman and their unique relationship, it veils the entire thing in euphemistic analogies and it's intended for that because it is the most private thing in human life and God wants to make sure it stays private and yet He celebrates the beauty of it.

PHIL: Yeah, now you go through all of that in detail in the MacArthur Study Bible.

JOHN: Yes I do, going through Song of Solomon, right.

PHIL: And I think it's intriguing that that's exactly how you dealt with it so that the notes while they explain some of the imagery, do so without violating that sense of privacy that you get as you read it.

JOHN: You know, and it's also true that they're cultural analogies that might not work today. I mean, I doubt that we would say to our wives when we wanted to express something about their beauty the same thing that they would have said then in an agrarian culture. So it is so culturally designed in that environment to speak of things very familiar, things that spoke of beauty and joy and all of that, that I think they even shift and change.

PHIL: Yeah, the point is clear, it's the tenderness and the joy of that relationship.

JOHN: Well what it is, it's a guy saying about his wife, "I can't find enough words to describe your beauty." And instead of just having 42 adjectives, you're really, really, really, really, really beautiful, he just grabs all the imagery in the beauty of creation, all the imagery in a Garden, all the imagery in the agrarian culture, all the imagery of the beautiful motions and forms of animals, he just grabs everything that he can find and expresses...it's for the purpose of finding ways to express without just tacking on, you know, repeated adjectives in front of how beautiful she is. So...but I do think the veiling of it is what gives it its wonderful, wonderful beauty.

And by the way, it has been a rare, rare day in the history of the church when anybody interpreted Song of Solomon in the explicit way that it is being interpreted today. And this is the new popular book to teach.

I was at a pastors' conference recently with some young guys and there were about four or five of us...four of the young guys were starting Song of Solomon and I just grabbed my head because I knew what was going to happen. They're going to jump into that thing and they're going to follow the explicit style that has become the kind of pop way to do it and they're going to tear into that book, and I just fear they'll rape the book the way others have done it recently.

PHIL: Yeah, that's the pattern they have to follow, isn't it?

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: One of the other things you mentioned is the sort of lowering the bar with regard to what kind of language is deemed appropriate for Christians to use in their casual conversation and even more so in the pulpit? We hear now about pastors using profanity from the pulpit, I mean, I hear stories about that every single week and it's become a big thing. And the argument there is twofold. One, they say

this is vital to do as a means of contextualization, to translate the gospel message into language that the people I'm trying to reach can understand. This is the language of our culture, so it's appropriate to translate the message into that language. That's argument number one.

Argument number two is, Scripture doesn't give us any list of forbidden words, and for every dirty word you can name, I can name a synonym that means the same thing, so why is this word deemed dirty, there's no biblical command to abstain from this or that particular word? Why are some of these words inappropriate and is the culture changing to the point where they're not inappropriate anymore?

JOHN: Well first of all, with regard to contextualization, I will probably sound like a dinosaur at this particular point, but I think the only context that people need when you communicate to them the Word of God is the biblical context. Look, there's a context assumed, right? I'm talking in the English language. Okay, that much context we have. I think I've lived long enough in this culture and long enough spoken this language that I know what the words in this language mean. So that is just a false standard. You talk in the language of the people and that's really all you need. I think the only context people need, the only context they need to have the power of divine truth hit them is the biblical context. So they know what it meant by what it said. That is the issue.

With regard to the second thing you pointed out, what about words? I think it's pretty simple. We all know what words are considered curse words, swear words, out of bounds. We all know what words gracious mothers would rather not have their little children hear. We all know what words children say when they come home from school and their mothers say, "Don't ever say that word again." You know, when I was a kid I got my mouth washed out with Fel's Naptha soap for a few words and it had a great effect on me. We all know that. The culture knows that. And if the culture shifts over a long period of time, maybe that would change. But for pastors to lead the shift, for pastors to be the out-front guy, "Okay, guys, I'm going to start using this word because this is just a word and there are three other synonyms to this word, so let me lead the parade," I think is irresponsible and mostly it's immature. It's kind of like being a perennial seventh grader who just loves to be able to say that word and not get his mouth washed out.

PHIL: Yeah. Now you mentioned that these standards because they really are cultural standards, there is no definition of the boundaries in Scripture, Paul simply says, "Let no filthy talk come out of your mouth," he assumes they're going to know what they mean. And I read a thing today, it says in the Roman world there were about 1200 words deemed cuss words by comparison in English we have about 30. And there are people who would say that standard is changing, John, it has changed, maybe you've missed it, but people use these words all the time so if the standard is changed, why not embrace it?

JOHN: Well maybe someday I will, but I'll be the last one. Why?



PHIL: Yeah, my answer.

JOHN: Well as long as there's anybody left who is going to be offended, what ground have I gained? I mean, it's my...look, we say this in another context, people always ask me about how do we do music at Grace Church? And my answer is this, to elevate people. And secondly, to do music that never ever intrudes on any one's ability to worship. Why would I want to eliminate them from worshiping? I want to find the most common ground I can find. And the same would be true in the speech that I use in the pulpit.

Oh sure, I might be able to say some things that some people would think cool, but if there's going to be anybody in my mind that is going to be offended by me saying that, I'm not going to say that. So that's why I say, if things do change, I'll be the last guy to use those kinds of words because there may be some folks out there who haven't caught up with the trend yet and why would I cheapen myself, why would offend them when what I want to gain is a hearing and an acceptance with them? And I don't want to shock them, I don't want to drive them away.

One of the things that happens when you throw this kind of stuff into your messages, it doesn't communicate. And I think this needs to be said. Swearing, cussing, dirty talk, whatever it is in a message does not aid communication. What it does is shock people and end communication. It stops it because they're stunned by it and they lose you. You know, instead of, "Oh wow, he really connected with me," the jolt of it becomes either a joke, an offense, and it's a distraction. So it really doesn't aid communication at all. And people will walk away maybe forgetting everything else you said and remembering only that.

PHIL: Okay, now one of the other common arguments against this is, "Look, you're talking style here, not substance, this is just a matter of generational conflict. You're old-fashioned, that's the sort of church you grew up in. The people I'm trying to reach aren't shocked by this sort of language.

JOHN: Well look, you know our church, so, last Sunday night we had 60 people join the church. Sixty people joined the church...two were out of their thirties, two...all the rest were in their thirties. You tell me how many nations were there represented?

PHIL: Boy, it's hard to say.

JOHN: Asian people, Middle Eastern people, African American people, and we've been tracking this for a dozen years now and I say this...look, 85 percent of the people that come to Grace Church over the last dozen years are in their thirties and under, and they're Los Angeles. They're Hispanic, they're Asian, they're Korean, they're Pilipino, more Armenian people joining our church, Middle Eastern people joining our church, they're from all over the place. I just want to make sure that in my ministry

to these people, I don't offend any of those people. And so I stay so far inside the bounds, not only of words but of humor. My mind isn't filled with dirty stories, I'm not trying to have to check myself all the time...oops, can't say that.

I just...I think out of the heart the mouth speaks and I don't see any purpose in cultivating some kind of whatever you want to call it, connection with people by getting on the edge either of the words you use, or the sexual innuendos or the smarmy kind of humor, it's just...it's pointless.

PHIL: There is also a sense...the true sense in which the medium colors the message, so...

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: You do actually affect the content of the message if you start to translate it into, you know, filthy humor and dirty language, and all of that. It's pretty hard to represent the holiness of God when you're catering to the fleshliness of the culture.

JOHN: Yeah. Let me tell you a story. Sunday, last Sunday morning, a lady walked up to me, she said, "I go to such-and-such a church, it's in our area." She said, "I take my two boys," and she said, "I work in AWANA, I'm a leader in AWANA." That's a children's ministry. She said, "I've come to your church because I'm sick of the cursing that goes on in AWANA. I said, "In AWANA? A children's ministry?" She said, "Yes, I'm just sick of the cursing and I don't think I should have my children exposed to that."

Well, look, if it's okay for the pastor to do it, right? It should be okay for the AWANA leader to do it. How sad. The trickledown effect is very real. You know, you're going to have the freedom to do that in the pulpit, believe me, you're never going to be able to stem the tide in the pew. You legitimize people flooding their minds with the kinds of things that produce that kind of speech.

PHIL: Another common complaint you hear from people who say, "Yeah, we think this is legitimate, we want the church to move more and more in this direction, they'll cite 1 Corinthians 9:22 where Paul says, "I become all things to all people that I might by all means win some."

JOHN: Oh I hate it when they use that verse.

PHIL: What does that verse mean if not that we should contextualize...?

JOHN: It doesn't have anything to do with that. What Paul is saying there is the opposite of that. What he is saying is, "I will restrict any liberty, every liberty that I have, I will give up anything, I will sacrifice anything, I will change my behavior whatever it requires, whatever I have to give up, I will give up for the sake of reaching those people. That's what it means. It is not saying that in order to reach those people I have to become like those people, he's really not talking about freeing himself up to talk like

them and act like them and live like them to reach them. He's talking about the very opposite. He's saying there isn't anything I wouldn't give up, there isn't anything I wouldn't say no to, there isn't anything I wouldn't restrain and hold back and forfeit for the sake of reaching people with the gospel.

So that's a very, very different approach.

PHIL: Yeah, in fact doesn't the pastor have a biblical duty to stand above the culture in order to be an example to his people? That's what Paul told Titus.

JOHN: Well of course, yeah, don't, you know, be like the culture, don't be like the Cretans who are lazy gluttons. Well he should have said to them, I suppose in the Church Growth Movement, "become a lazy glutton so you can reach those people." What in the world? That is just so bizarre.

Again, from my standpoint, look, I've been preaching now over 40 years in the same church, cultures have come and gone. How fast? Really fast. Trends have come and gone, like lightning, just more and more and different and changes and what have we done different? Absolutely nothing...absolutely nothing. If you listen to Grace To You, you might be listening to a message preached 35 years ago, or 35 days ago, or three years ago, it doesn't matter. The messages that I preach at Grace Church I also preach on satellite television in Germany, or in India, or I get in an airplane and I preach them in Italy, or I preach them in Russia or I preach them in the Ukraine or I preach them in Latin America, or I preach them in Asia, or I preach them in London, or I preach them in Scotland. And I tell pastors all the time, if you can't get your sermon out of your zip code, throw it away. If you can't get your sermon out of your country, throw it away. It ought to be transcended.

And that's one of the real joys of our ministry is that our Christian radio goes across the world in English a thousand times a day and also in Spanish a thousand times a day. Books are translated into, I don't know, 50, 60 languages all over the world. I don't change anything when they translate a book.

Somebody said to me, we were talking about it yesterday, they're doing your Study Bible in Arabic. Are they having any trouble with the issues of American culture in the Arabic culture? And I said no because there's nothing in my Study Bible about the American culture, there's nothing there. And it's in German and French and Italian and Russian and Spanish and English, and now it's soon Chinese and Arabic, and so far nobody has said to me, "Can you help us fix this American colloquialism? I just think you put a narrowing on your ministry, you limit yourself. How wonderful it is to be able to preach...well, you know, Spurgeon was like that.

JOHN: Where did his sermons go? They said every ship that left England for twenty years was packed with thousands of his sermons. Where did they go? They went to every port in the world...

PHIL: And people still read them...

JOHN: And they still read them today. You know, every time I write a book, we wind up with Spurgeon in the book somewhere, an appendix, or introduction to a chapter, or quotes, or whatever, just totally transcendent...just totally transcendent. And that's what happens when you stick with the truth of Scripture.

PHIL: It's timeless.

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: You marry a spirit of the age and you're destined to become a widower.

JOHN: Good for you guys. You know, when I go to heaven, you can just keep playing my tapes.

PHIL: We intend to do that. (Laughter) If we outlast you.

So, John, is this...let's talk about holiness in the church, do you see this as a result of the lack of holiness in the church or is this a trend that is causing a lack of holiness in the church? Or is it just an endless cycle where it's feeding upon itself and this is ...?

JOHN: All of the above...all of the above.

PHIL: So how do we get out of it?

JOHN: The church is unholy...the church is unholy. First of all, we don't have sanctifying shepherds. We don't have sanctifying shepherds. If the pastor's objective is to be cool with the culture, oh, he's going to make massive sacrifices to the process of sanctification, right? If he's not consumed with the holiness of his people, then he's really prostituted his calling.

Look, Paul said, "I am in birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you." He said, "Who sins and I don't feel the pain?" To the Corinthians. Do you understand that a pastor has one calling? Peter, 1 Peter 5, "Feed the flock of God...Feed the flock of God." It doesn't say, "Revolutionize your community." It doesn't say, you know, "Reach the unreached." It doesn't say, "Reach unchurched Harry and Sally." It doesn't say, "Raise the moral consciousness of your city. Feed the flock of God." We are sanctifiers by calling, that's what we do. We are sanctifying agents in the church. My goal as a pastor is to give an account to the Lord of the church for how I have been faithful to feed the flock of God, over which I've been given oversight, or in the language of Hebrews 13, they are to follow our faith and we give an account for that.

Ephesians chapter 4 says the same thing, "He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, teaching pastors...for what?...for the perfecting of the saints, the building of the body to the fullness of Christ."

We've gone so far away from that, trying to titillate the people, trying to titillate the non-believer, make them feel comfortable. The call of the pastor is to feed, nurture the flock of God to spiritual maturity, Christ likeness. Now if you don't do that, if all you try to do is make non-believers comfortable, you literally sacrifice holiness, you sacrifice sanctification, and then you get an unsanctified congregation that will continue to be unsanctified. You can't change the trend and they are going to be more and more victimized because they're immature and unable to cope with the real issues of life and they're going to fall victim to sin again and again and again and again. It just escalates and what you get is a sinful congregation and all the time you're convinced that if you can just draw a big crowd, you've done what your calling is. That's not your calling. That's not your calling. Your calling is not to get a crowd of unbelievers together. Your calling is to feed the flock of God so they can be mature and godly and holy and righteous. And then when they go out in the world, they live the life that is attractive and winsome and draw people to Christ and proclaim the gospel.

So I think it is true that churches are unsanctified because pastors are not sanctifying shepherds and...

PHIL: Would you say the root of this problem then lies with leadership problems? It's a leadership issue in the church.

JOHN: Always...always...like people, like priests. People never rise higher than their leader.

PHIL: Well-known pastors using bad language, issuing sex challenges to their people. Some of the pastors of American's largest churches doing this, would you say this is a serious enough thing to disqualify some of those men from ministry?

JOHN: I would. Look, it's a serious enough thing to disqualify you from ministry if you don't do what you're supposed to. Forget that you do what you're not supposed to, you shouldn't be qualified if you don't even do what you're supposed to. We're to feed the flock of God. I don't know how you could say it more clearly. Peter says, "Feed the flock of God." Well where do you think he learned that?

Well he learned that as we know in John 21, when he comes off the denial of Christ and Jesus meets Him post resurrection and confronts him and says, "Do you love Me? Do you love Me? Do you love Me?" And every time he says yes, he says, "Feed My sheep, feed My sheep, feed My sheep." And Peter got the message. And so when he wrote to pastors, he said, "Feed the flock of God and do it humbly, not lording it over them, like you're some important person. Do it humbly, do it graciously, don't do it for money, right? Not for filthy lucre."

So I think it's as simple as this. The shepherds who feed their flock are the ones that do what God has called them to do. And hey, all of us will give an account. First Corinthians 4 says, "They'll come a day when no matter what people have said about us, no matter what we think about ourselves, the secrets of the heart will be revealed and then will every man have his praise from God.

PHIL: Now with regard to the shepherd's duty to feed the flock, I know you've preached on this at least twice recently. Once was at the Moody Pastors' Conference this past summer, and then more recently from a student's perspective. You gave a similar message on this subject to students, college students at the Resolve Conference, talking about what sort of spiritual leaders they should look for. Talk about that for a moment.

JOHN: Well, first of all, it needed to be said to pastors because pastors need to do what they should, but it also needs to be said to kids. And this may seem like a rather narrow approach, but I am convinced that young people pick churches for all the wrong reasons. They pick a church because of the music. They pick a church because of the video, or they pick a church because...one kid said to me, "I go to Such-And-Such a church."

"Why do you go there?"

"Because the pastor is a cool dude, man, he comes and plays basketball with us."

Really, really. You can go to the YMCA and find somebody to play basketball with you. You know, kids they just don't make the most informed spiritual decisions. So my objective, talking to 4,000 college kids at Resolve was to say, "Look, not only are pastors responsible for what they are, and what they do, but you are responsible to God for the choice you make as to what church you're a part of. And you need to find a sanctifying pastor." And then I describe to them what a sanctifying pastor is like and how critical it is that he be that way and how secure and safe and protected and blessed you are when you find someone like that.

You know, kids are...it's a hero-worshipping world, right? We've got all of these frivolous, unaccomplished people who are famous for being famous, who are the heroes of our youth, whether they're athletes who live utterly immoral and grossly greedy lives, or movie actors, or these musicians, whoever they are, kids don't necessarily pick the best heroes to follow. And the pastor that looks like their heroes or acts like their sort of worldly heroes oftentimes attracts them...if he's funny, if he's cool, if the music is really the kind they like. Somehow they've got to get beyond that. I've often wished that God would just shut down all the music. Well He will, according to the book of Revelation, all the music will one day will stop.

But I always wonder if all the music stopped, where would people go to church? I think that a lot of them probably wouldn't go at all because in many cases you've got basically a rock concert with a twenty-minute Sermonettes for Christianettes at the end. But I think kids need to make decisions about where they're going to go that are far beyond the kind of things that are making those decisions for them. That's why I want to talk to them about it. You've got to pick the right church. You've got to be under a sanctifying shepherd. And what should you look for? And what would be the marks of that kind of shepherd?

PHIL: Okay, John, in conclusion, just talk to our listeners. I know some people have followed this trend or they see it as a threat. For some this is the first time they've heard about it. What should they do next at the personal level? What can we as church people do to sort of counter this trend and help set things right.

JOHN: I think if it exists in your church, you need to go to your pastor, or write him, and just say, "I appreciate you...if you do...but I don't think this is necessary, it's offensive. I don't think it honors the Lord. It's not helpful to me. And that's the first place you go. You know, the only way to ever resolve an issue is to confront the issue. A sanctifying pastor knows the power of confrontation. I think you do that. I don't think you try to tear up the church and create a gossip campaign and all that. But I do think you go directly to the person in charge, the pastor or youth leader, whoever is taking these kinds of liberties and just let them know that this is not helpful and you're deeply concerned about it. That's the first thing to do.

And then I think you've got to decide whether you if indeed the person responds, you know, you can stay and be a part of that, if they don't respond, look, there's no sense in being loyal to something that's not spiritually beneficial. Find a sanctifying shepherd.

And I think instead of being caught up in the contemporary culture, this may sound a little unusual, start reading great material from the past. Get out of this culture. I tell people, young people particularly, you don't need any more of this culture. You don't need your pastor acting like he's on a talk show. You don't need your pastor acting like the people you see on television. You need something that is unaffected by the constantly increasing corruption of the culture. I encourage young people to read the Puritans. Go back, read sermons by Spurgeon, get good sermon material. If you know somebody, you know, gives good sermons on the Word of God, a gifted communicator and Bible teacher, get their material, listen to their material. You don't need more cultural junk, you certainly don't need it from the pulpit. What you do need is to think biblically.

And I think the issue is get separated from the culture. Come out of it, get out of it. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. Friendship with the world is enmity with God, all these kinds of things are clear in Scripture.

When I step in to the pulpit at our church, when anybody teaches at any level in our church, the last thing we want to do is to make sure that everybody knows how well we are informed about the culture. The culture is everywhere and it has a million variations that we could never get to anyway. But what we want them to know is we are consumed with something that is unaffected by the culture and that's the truth of God. So I think, go to sources that are transcendent, go back in years and read Donald Grey Barnhouse, or go back and read Jim Boice, or go back all the way to the Puritans and begin to think biblically apart from your culture. You don't need to have everything strained through this culture. It sucks out the life of it, it's..I guess you could say cultural preaching takes the nutrients out of the truth. That's what it does.

PHIL: Well thank you, John. I know I speak for thousands of our listeners when I say thank you for your clear thinking on this and the clarity with which you speak. And thanks for the admonition to think biblically and for the help you give us in doing that.

JOHN: Well it's my joy, Phil, and thank you for your great partnership and friendship, it's a real blessing to me. What a wonderful life of ministry the Lord's given is together, right?

PHIL: Amen.

JOHN: Yeah.

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