

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

Straight Talk About the Seeker Church Movement

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Phil and John Discuss the Seeker Movement

JOHN: Hi, this is John MacArthur. You know that my commitment is to teach the Bible verse by verse to the congregation of our church every week. And we've been doing that for 35 years. Grace To You, our radio ministry, takes that teaching and transform it into radio programs and sometimes into books and articles and, of course, always those messages are on CD and tape and MP3. Most of the time we're doing those expositions. But sometimes, in fact seemingly more often now than not, there's a movement or a trend that comes along that is very high profile and very effective, it's sort of sweeping and influential and at the same time troubling. And so I feel that when that happens that I need to address that issue in a way that I can't when I'm preaching in the pulpit. And I know that many of these issues get to you, our listeners, and our family out there in Grace To You and I just feel like I have to take the opportunity from time to time to help you to perhaps have some insight into what's going on.

And that's why I'm here today in the studio with my friend and colleague, and fellow pastor, Phil Johnson. Phil is Executive Director here at Grace To You and a long time fellow preacher and teacher of mine and dear friend. And we're going to talk about an issue that's critically important and an issue that is very clear to us, you, our ministry family, wants some help to understand. So, Phil, thanks for sort of prompting my thinking on the subject and being here to help us clarify some of these things today.

PHIL: Thank you, John. Today we want to talk about ministry philosophy, the way we do church. And there's a growing movement actually for the past ten years or so it seems the largest growing, fastest growing segment of evangelicalism today is going after a philosophy of ministry that's variously called Market-Driven Churches, The Seeker Movement. There's a famous book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* that more or less outlines this philosophy of ministry.

Tell us exactly what this is.

JOHN: Well, I don't know if I can cover, you know, all that ground, but I would approach it this way. This is a redefining of the leadership of the church, along lines that appear to me to be far more entrepreneurial than biblical. This is importing into the church the cultural success patterns, looking

at corporate America, looking at successful CEOs, looking at successful businesses, everything from Ben and Jerry's to Microsoft and trying to find the triggers, trying to find the avenues, trying to find the access, the hot buttons that allow them to sell their product to the degree that they do and to be so successful in corporation life.

And so, the church in those last ten or fifteen years has basically been in many ways co-opted or commandeered by the entrepreneurs. And the guys who can really pull it off, the guys who are the clever guys, the glib guys, the smooth communicators, the guys who are really savvy to the marketing strategy, the guys who have a lot of money at their feet who can access a lot of money and pull this off are becoming the success models for the church. And now they're getting all the kudos, they're selling books by the millions, they're creating massive websites and sucking up all kinds of other pastors and churches into the vortex of these entrepreneurial kind of culturally driven quasi churches. It isn't that everything they say is wrong. It isn't that everything they do is wrong. It is that the church is being run by market savvy entrepreneurs. That in itself has no connection to Scripture.

You know, the simple question is: what ever happened to the man of God? What ever happened to the man of God who is known as a man of prayer, as a man of deep understanding of Scripture, who is known as a Bible teacher, who is known as a godly man whose life is a pattern to follow, who is a discipler of others, who's a builder of spiritual leaders? And even going deeper into the issue, whatever happened to the understanding of the church as the body of Christ over which Christ is the head who Himself as the Lord of the church has already defined the ministry of the church and the content for that ministry and the leadership for that ministry and how that leadership is to function? It just seems as if we've pushed aside the biblical model. We've pushed aside the man of God. And because some of these guys have been so successful, you know, beyond what has ever happened, certainly in the modern era in the church before, and because there is a seductive element in success and bigness, this thing has become a movement that has gained immense speed. The fallout is that it's very hard for most people to pull off this kind of entrepreneurial church. They don't have the cleverness, the creativity. They don't have the resources financially and personnel wise. They can't quite pull it off. They don't have sort of a clean state...slate to start their deal in and so what they try to do is a vain attempt at this and it winds up fracturing a church, or splintering a church, or creating conflict in a church. And very often a guy will try it, fail and leave. And there's a congregation sitting there now divided with no idea of who their next leader should be and chaos very often ensues and the church is on a path of very difficult recovery.

So, there's a lot of fallout to this movement. And I think the bottom line is it redefines the church in cultural terms, in turns the church into a marketing agency that says what it thinks its supposed customers want to hear.

PHIL: So you have a problem with the philosophy of the church that underlies this and the approach to leadership. It seems to me as you describe it, too, there's a major problem with this idea that the gospel is a commodity to be peddled.

JOHN: Yeah, there's no question about that. But that is the underlying idea. The underlying idea is the gospel is a commodity. We're selling this just like people sell magazines, just like they sell, you know, basketball shoes, just like they sell tires, cars, or whatever else they sell.

PHIL: And there's lots of people though that would say, "You can't argue with success." I mean, you know it yourself that a lot of these churches are huge and...

JOHN: Yeah, and that's the seduction. That's the draw. If they weren't, there wouldn't be anybody listening. If they weren't, there wouldn't be buying into the website. The question is not "can they get a crowd?" You want to get a crowd? There's a lot of ways to get a crowd. They have figured out how to get a crowd and call it church. There's a big difference between a crowd and a church...big difference. And if the truth is known in these seeker-friendly environments, one would have to ask the question: is there in here somewhere a true church in the midst of the crowd? I mean, Jesus drew crowds, massive crowds.

I'm right now teaching through Luke 12 and the crowds based upon the language there in chapter 12 verse 1 could have numbered in the tens of thousands. He could draw the crowd, but it says there that He was talking to the disciples. And eventually what He said to the disciples caused the crowd to turn on Him, it caused some of the disciples, so-called disciples, to leave Him very early in His ministry, those who were disciples wouldn't walk with Him anymore. But eventually the crowd not only left, the crowd came back with a roar and forced the crucifixion. So the point is this, the idea is not to draw a crowd and then to somehow redefine the crowd as a church. If you want to draw a crowd, preach...figure out how to draw a crowd, that's fine, but make sure you preach the clear, pure, unadulterated, unmixed gospel of Jesus Christ and trust the Holy Spirit to do His work. After all, salvation is the work of the Spirit. It doesn't come by the cleverness of the preacher. That's why Paul said he did not speak in clever words of human wisdom.

PHIL: You've been writing and dealing with this subject for at least 15 years and I've read or edited practically everything you've said on it. It seems to me that one of your main complaints about this whole movement is what you just said, that it tends to diminish preaching. It tends to push the pulpit off to the side and replace the preaching of God's Word with other things.

JOHN: Phil, you know because you know me and because you're the same way, I'm driven by the truth. I'm compelled by the truth. I'm obligated to the truth. The truth is what matters. I'm never concerned...and this is Pauline...Paul says, "You know, I'm going to preach the gospel." It's going to

be the foolishness of the preaching, you can't replace preaching. I was just asked a question on the radio: Can contemporary music replace preaching? And I answered it this way, nothing can replace preaching, nothing. It is by the foolishness of preaching that those who believe are being saved, 1 Corinthians. So has the church come to the conclusion where it doesn't believe that anymore? We've got to get the preaching out and turn it into cool talk, or cool speak, or contemporary vernacular. It is the preaching that does the work and Paul would not be intimidated by the Corinthian expectation of clever speech because it existed in their day as well, and oratory and all of that. He continually goes back to the fact that he must be faithful to the preaching and that the content of that preaching is to be the Word of God, nothing more and nothing less. And I think that's where this thing goes astray.

It goes astray at its view of biblical authority and the power of the Word of God. It questions...it has to question the authority of Scripture. It has to question the power of Scripture because it replaces it.

PHIL: Yeah, now, of course, many...many of the men who promote this would say they don't question the authority of Scripture or the power of Scripture.

JOHN: Yeah, easy to say, hard to prove. I mean, you can say you believe in the authority of Scripture, so you tell me what's most powerful? Your cleverness or the Bible, you tell me what's the most powerful. I'll tell you when you stand up and speak what you believe. If you tell me the Bible is far more powerful, you get up in a pulpit and preach a little sermonette on a coffee machine, as I've seen them do, or on a TV sitcom, what you're telling me that you believe the Bible is the most powerful and what you're doing is contradicting what you're telling me. You don't have any integrity and I'm going to opt out for the fact that when you get up there in front of those people that you care to reach, you're going to use what you think is best. And if you use you and not God's Word, then it doesn't matter what you tell me about the Bible, I know by what you do what your real conviction is.

PHIL: Well, in fact, you were just reading me an excerpt from one of the books that came out of this movement where he said that sometimes a personal testimony or a personal story will penetrate a heart where the Word of God could not. Do you believe that?

JOHN: No. What's it going to penetrate a heart with? Emotion? Oh, I could tell...I could tell stories, I mean, I'm a speaker, I'm a preacher, I could tell stories that make people cry, sometimes I do that. You know, at our church, sometimes people weep when you tell them a heart-warming...that's not hard to do. You can...you can move people around emotionally. You can jerk them all over the place emotionally. That isn't how people get saved. That same book, and you're talking about *The Purpose-Driven Lifebook*, that same book says the great thing about telling stories is it bypasses intellectual defenses.

Let me tell you something. No one was ever converted who didn't go through the intellect. Nobody was ever converted who didn't have their intellectual defenses shot down. You can't bypass how people think and make them feel their way into salvation. That's an illusion. So what you've got is a false conversion. This is a battle for the mind. This is a battle for how people think. And if you've got intellectual defenses, they've got to come down and the only thing that's going to bring them down is not your emotional clever little cute story. What's going to tear them down is the truth and now that puts you right in 2 Corinthians 10 where Paul says, "You know, these people are in these fortresses, these fortresses are nothing more than their belief systems with all the intellectual defenses." So, he says, you can't...you know, you can't bring them down with carnal weapons. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal. You can't use human cleverness and your, you know, your little insights and your little practicalities and your cute little things to smash these defenses. And he says these fortresses are *logismos* in the Greek, they are ideologies. They're systems of thinking.

How do you smash a system of thinking? You can't go around it. That's absurd. You can't evade the intellectual defense. You've got to hit it head on with divine truth which energized by the Holy Spirit crushes those defenses. Paul says, "We bring down those fortresses and bring every thought captive to Christ." This is a battle for the mind. And any ministry that avoids the mind and all of the possible and real defenses that people have in the mind is going to live with false conversions.

PHIL: How did this movement get started?

JOHN: Robert Schuller started it.

PHIL: Really!

JOHN: I mean, in the modern sort of form. Yeah, Robert Schuller said, "If you want to know how to build a church, ask the people in your neighborhood." Don't ask Christ who is the head of the church, ask the people in the neighborhood. So he did a survey when he came to Orange County, you know, he's a transplanted Michigan guy who came out of a liberal background and belonged to the Reformed church, but told me personally he could sign the statement of the Reformed church and not believe what they meant by it. This is classic neoorthodoxy. He said I could make those words mean anything I want. So he starts a church and since he doesn't have any commitment to biblical authority, everything for him is psychological, he's going to figure out a way to build a church by using psychology. And psychology says, I go to the community, tell them I want to have a church that you want to come to, so what would you like your church to be like? They then tell him what they want the church to be like. Now they've obligated them...he's obligated them to come to the church that they themselves have shaped. And that's what happened. And so he built this, he calls it a church, it's a crowd, it's a group of people who come under the title of church, one would certainly agree that based upon the theology, it in itself is not a church. There perhaps are believers there. And Bill Hybels then was drawn to the success pattern of this. He was drawn to the numbers and, of course,

the wealth that came with it. And these are always planted, by the way, whether you're talking about Schuller, or Hybels, or whether you're talking about Rick Warren, those churches are all planted in highly affluent societies, in places where there's a great amount of affluence to fund this kind of thing. And they're all cultural niche churches, they can only appeal to a certain type of person in terms of sociology and economics.

So, you know, Bill says his guru is Robert Schuller. And so he was going to do the same kind of thing only with a different generation. And then Rick Warren comes along and does a similar kind of thing in a similarly isolated community of affluent people with another kind of generation. But it all really goes back to the methodology of Robert Schuller that says if you want to know what to do in the church, find out what people want and give them what they want.

PHIL: That's basically the felt-needs philosophy. You know, find out somebody's felt needs, what need to they feel and address that.

Now do you reject that completely?

JOHN: I reject that as a motivation for the message. In other words, when I come to church on a Sunday morning and there are six thousand people there, I really...it really is not important to me what each and every one of those people think they need at the moment. You know, maybe somebody needs relief from his nagging wife, maybe somebody needs relief from his rebellious teenager. Maybe somebody needs to have his mother-in-law go back to Cincinnati. I mean, maybe somebody else is struggling with cancer. I mean, I can't sort through all of that. This is not about psychology, this is not about putting band-aids on people's problems. In fact, I've been so bold as to say to people, "You know, we know you have severe problems, but just be patient, they'll go away and worse ones will come." I mean, what are we talking about here? This is life. Man is born into trouble as the sparks fly upward. Sooner or later you start living with a heavenly mind set and you see these earthly issues in perspective as very temporary and not the way you define either the blessing of God on your life, or the purpose of your life. So...

PHIL: So what you're really saying is that there is a dangerous man-centered focus in that whole felt-needs idea, right? It drives you to a man-centered theology.

JOHN: That's right. I mean, you're talking in terms of the big picture. And it goes back to what I said before. Christ is the head of the church. It is His mind that informs the church. We have the mind of Christ. And the mind of Christ is revealed in the Scripture, this is what we preach, this is what we teach. We don't ask the world what they want to hear. Jesus never did. The prophets never did. The Apostles never did. That's why they all kept getting killed. You know, when people go pouring in, when the general public goes pouring in to the secular bookstore to buy your Christian book,

there's something missing there.

PHIL: John, I've read a few of these books and the advice they give preachers and so on and it seems to me that your preaching breaks all the rules of seeker-sensitivity. You don't use the personal illustrations, or the cute little stories, you don't use Power Point.

JOHN: (Laugh) That's because I don't use the computer. But no, I don't need Power Point. Look, Power Point is one means of communication. And the world has done fine for millennia without Power Point. It's a means of communication. And it's very efficient and a very good means of communication in some environments. You know, there are a lot of means of communication, television, radio, all of that. Preaching is in itself a means of communication. Preaching...I mean, look, you still have, I mean, just we're a television generation, it still amazes me that we still have standup comics. None of them are funny and none of them will I listen to because they're all crude. But you still have standup comics, people who stand up in front of an audience with a microphone, don't have anything other than their mouth and they talk and people listen. You still have political speeches. You have guys get up and give speeches, most of them are somewhat painful to endure because they're just endless sound bytes designed for further media, you know, play. But don't underestimate people. Preaching is in itself a means of communication. It is a form of communication. And when the preacher is gifted with the Holy Spirit when he's enriched with the content of Scripture, and when he's well prepared, it can be a very dramatic and dynamic means of communication.

PHIL: Do you think all this emphasis on illustrations and jokes and Power Point and all that has actually diminished the effectiveness of preachers in our generation? Maybe there aren't as many good preachers because they're being trained to do stuff that is frankly detrimental to good preaching.

JOHN: Yeah, first of all, it takes up a lot of time. Secondly, it's in a sense a concession to people that...it's condescending. It's like saying, "I know you can't take serious talk for 45 minutes, so let me entertain you for a little bit here, a little bit there, a little bit here." I think you really underestimate...I mean, even in our church situation, it's amazing, but our guys in the junior-high ministry sit the kids down, I'm talking Junior-High kids, and they do a Bible exposition with them for an hour.

PHIL: I know, I used to teach in junior high.

JOHN: Yeah...yeah. And you know what? Those kids are trained to dig into the Word of God, to open their Bibles and to follow the flow. Now you can't just turn anybody loose in that environment, it has to be somebody who's skilled, you know, and gifted at communication at that level.

PHIL: It's actually harder to do it at that level than it is adults.

JOHN: Yeah, well the thing that's good about kids, and why I like to speak to kids is if they're not interested, they have the courtesy to talk.

PHIL: I have this theory about Power Point that if you can't preach it's not going to help you anyway. So it's like a broken crutch, it doesn't do you much good.

JOHN: That's exactly right . If you can't preach, nothing's going to help you. If you can't preach, don't. You know, if that's not your gift, and I'm not being harsh, if that's not your gift, don't. I think there's a power and a flow in preaching. There's a...you're dealing with the minds of people. And I think there's a logical flow in good preaching. There's a power that just carries a person along. I know when I hear good preaching, that's how I am, I'm involved in this, this is an experience for me, this is an event. It's a mental event, first of all, and draws my emotion into it. But I think there's a flow in that and it shouldn't be chopped up with, "Okay, well let's stop and have a skit, or let's stop and have a Power Point." You know, I encourage people to take notes, not to store them forever, but as you jot things down as you listen, it kind of keeps you on track and it emphasizes and sort of imbeds something that was said a little more firmly in your mind.

PHIL: There's something unprecedented about this whole seeker-sensitive movement. If you look back through church history, all the major movements like the Protestant Reformation, sparked by preaching and the men who led were all great preachers, Calvin and Luther were renowned for their preaching. The Puritan Movement cranked out more great preachers than any other era. The first Great Awakening was sparked by preaching. The big mega churches in history, Spurgeon's tabernacle in London, all built around great preaching. Now for the first time in church history we have a major movement and massive churches built on something other than preaching.

JOHN: Right, definitely something other than preaching. Yeah, in fact you wonder...well, the one thing they could eliminate and nobody would care would be the preaching. That's true, that's a very important observation. If...the trend started coming with music. Churches began to be...I can think back to the seventies when the biggest church in this area, that I knew of really started the move toward music, big music. At least in a west coast experience. And I think music has continued to be the thing. And as music has come to literally dominate our culture, it is the...it is the front runner.

PHIL: It's an interesting thing because it's probably THE most controversial thing in evangelical churches across America, the thing that most churches would have internal strife over would be music style and things like that. And yet at Grace Church it's never been the case. It's never been a controversy. You're not someone who is hostile to music, or big music, as you say. We have big music at Grace Church and even contemporary music.

JOHN: Yeah, but...

PHIL: But it's not the focus.

JOHN: No. It accommodates, it comes alongside. It allows us to find different vehicles to sort of let our praise out. And there's a...there's...there's a wide and rich and varied opportunity in music because of its amazing, you know...God designed diversity. But what you have in our culture today is..only in a very limited sense could you even call it music. I mean, it's boring, it's repetitious. I mean, the music should reflect something of the grandeur of God, something of the glory and the greatness of God, something of the intricacy. We have an orchestra in our church and our choir and they sing things that...that demonstrate the sheer majesty of music. We're not just stuck on the simplicity of music. Without getting a little too philosophical, there's something wonderful about complexity as over against simplicity. You know, I think there's a breadth and height and length of music that suits a well grounded, well educated believer's experience, rather than just la-di-da-di-da over and over and over and over which is more reflective, it seems to me, a more shallow understanding of these things.

PHIL: The style actually follows the idea of the shallowness of it.

JOHN: I've said this before that I can go into a church and listen to the opening and tell you how deep their theology is.

PHIL: Now some people would say this whole thing is just about making the church more contemporary, making our worship more contemporary. Do you have any opposition inherently to the idea of making worship contemporary?

JOHN: I wish it was only about that. I wish it was only about that. I think, you know, we've been all over the world, Phil, you have, I have. I've seen worship every way you can do it. I mean, I've been in the ???? stuffy, too-high church kind of stuff for me that people are very comfortable with because that's been the way they've grown up and they're very used to it and they like standing up and sitting down, standing up and sitting down, and reciting back things out of...out of a prayer book. And I've had...and I've...and I've been to the most wild-eyed Anglican communion down in South Africa where you think you're in a charismatic church. The theology isn't that but the expressions of worship are loud and raucous and happy and joyful and everything in between. I mean, I've been in the Andes and I've seen them sing familiar tunes in language that I don't know, and all over the world. I'm not even talking about style here.

What goes wrong in this movement is in the name of style they abandon the substance. In the name of style they alter the message. And once they've altered the message, then the style starts to move. You know what I'm saying? It starts to disintegrate into evermore worldly kinds of things.

I...look, I remember when people used to criticize our church because we had some guy playing a guitar. There was a...there was a pastor in our community and he was a real hard-line guy. And the first time we had a guitar, somebody reported to him we had a guitar in our church. And out came all this material from his church and he still pumps it out even now of how...how apostate we are because we had a guitar. I mean, and then it was a drum. I mean, somebody was actually playing a drum. And I..this was just more than he could handle. And I'm not saying that, you know, there is some sacrosanct form of worship, but I am saying once you abandon the message, the container, the comfort zone with the music and the worship will begin to broaden and broaden and broaden and broaden because you are so...you're introducing the culture to such...such ubiquitous level, it's dictating so much to the church that you...you can't draw that line. Then you're going to start preaching on the movies. Then you're going to start preaching on the pop-TV and interacting with all that cultural stuff which is like a mandate, in some ways, for the people to get in touch with their culture. You can't...you can't say that a preacher who is savvy on everything on television, savvy on all the trends, savvy on all the movies is going to be able to convey to his people separation from the world. In fact, he's putting himself in a vulnerable position by being way over exposed to the culture.

I was asked the other day, a lady, a brilliant lady happens to be on the faculty of one of our great universities and teaches aerospace engineering, she's chair of a department. And she said, "Do you in preparation for your sermons every week do you draw from the culture, from what's going on in the culture?" And I said no. She sort of sat back like...what do you do? I mean, everybody does that, you know. But I...there's a sense in which you want to be ignorant concerning evil, and I don't need to be cultural expert. I said, "You know what? I teach the Bible. I teach the Word of God. And I have a direct pipeline to the source who knows more about the culture than the culture does, and that's God."

PHIL: You're very out of step with what's going on because everything you've just said is currently mainstream. You know, you can go to almost any Christian bookstore of any size and buy Sunday-School curriculum that's based on Barney Fife.

JOHN: Well that's because these guys are marketers. They're marketers. There's no question that they can market. I mean, they could run a corporate market system right now. And that's what you're seeing. What you're seeing is a marketing plan being worked out. You hook them on the website, tell them they can have a big church, prepare sermons, send the sermons to them, send the curriculum to them. You know, duplicate your church. This becomes a massive marketing thing and the desperate guy out there who gets hooked at the front end and tweaks his church and now he's in that

groove and he doesn't want to reinvent the thing again and he still believes, you know, he can get his dream come true and maybe he can reach more people. And once you buy into it, you know, then you do 40 days of this and 40 days of that and 30 days of this and somebody else's is piping in all the stuff, and you know what you are? You're like a local TV affiliate and, you know, you just turn on the power in the morning and take the feed.

PHIL: And so it's gone from marketing the church to franchising the style. Yeah.

All right, you said something not long ago that I took note of that I think was kind of profound, the effect of this contemporizing everything and modernizing everything has been to create not only a contempt for church history but almost an absolute separation from the modern church and her past. Christians today just don't have any connection to the great hymns or writers or theologies...

JOHN: Well, not only do they not have a connection, but it is their badge of honor that they don't. I mean, I've seen them. They send the ads to my house, you know, about every month there's a new church planted in our community and so they do the same deal because they're all following the same model. They produce slick brochures, they go and they make sure they send it to everybody, you know, like the throw-away mail you get, occupant. And inevitably it goes like this, "Come to..." there's a guy and a girl on the front cover, it's kind of a slick deal, or neat little looking family, and the thing...and they're always dressed casually, you never see a guy with a tie, there's never going to be a guy with a suit, there's never going to be having a Bible in his hand, there's never going to be a Bible verse on there, it's going to say, in one way or another, "We don't have an organ. You're not going to hear any stuffy hymns. You don't have to get dressed up. Drop by on the way to your kid's soccer game, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And so there's this...this diminishing of the importance of church, diminishing the importance of worship, diminishing of the exalted character of it and it's all about this easy-come, easy-go, slip in, slip out, stick this one hour in your life and it will tweak your family and make you more successful and all of that. I don't know if that answers specifically the question that you directed, but...

PHIL: No, that is the point that all of this is severing ties with the whole history of the church.

JOHN: Yeah. So the idea is to say, "Ha, we're not going to do it the way they did it, are you kidding? You don't have to listen to that stuffy stuff." And so it's...the problem with it is who are they answerable to? You know, this is the downside of the independent church movement, everybody does what's right in his own eyes, everybody tweaks church his way, everybody goes whatever direction they want. Is it any wonder that people are confused about theology? You turn on Christian TV or in many cases even Christian radio, I mean, who wouldn't be confused? Who wouldn't be confused? There is no...I remember being on NBC news one night and the anchor in L.A. here said to me, "Who polices your movement?"

It was a great question. I said, "Nobody."

He said, "Isn't that a problem?"

I said, "Yes it's a problem." I said, "I'm available, I could put a committee together real fast. But I don't think anybody would submit." I said, "You know, in the days when there were denominations there's a reason why there were denominations. There was a reason why there were...you hate to think of it this way...there's a reason why there were elders and presbyters and even bishops and councils, somebody was the point of accountability."

Well, the tragic truth is that those denominations departed from the faith and in the vacuum independent churches grow up but independent churches still reflect human weakness. It's like Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of human government after every other form." So we've got an independent movement that has no accountability. Anybody coming into town whether he's gifted or called or whatever, starting a church, leading people down some path all on his own with no accountability to anybody. This is a real problem.

PHIL: It's created a generation of church goers who actually have been trained to have contempt for historic Christianity.

JOHN: That's exactly right. Not only contempt for historic Christianity but more importantly for the theology that is at the heart of historic Christianity.

PHIL: One of the first...

JOHN: They can't sing hymns. They don't get it...well they don't get it. They can only do the 7/11, seven words eleven times. They can't...they can't sing their way through a hymn, they're scratching their heads about, "Hey, where's the rhythm, where's the groove here," rather than grasping the content. Hymns relate...people say, "Why do you sing hymns in your church?" Because our people understand the subtleties of doctrine that are in them because they know theology.

PHIL: One of the first books you ever wrote that I had the privilege of editing was *The Ultimate Priority*, a book on worship.

JOHN: Yeah...that's back in the Dark Ages, Phil.

PHIL: Yeah...but, you know, it's still in print. And there's a section in there that left a profound impact on me, really changed the way I look at worship. And it's where you describe Uzzah when they were transporting the ark out of...from the Philistines had captured it and bringing it back and they put it on

a cart. And the oxen started to stumble and Uzzah reached out and touched the ark and God struck him dead.

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: And your point was that worship is serious business. It's not...it's not a thing to play with.

JOHN: The ark of the covenant was a symbol of the presence of God, the point of worship placed in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle with all the twelve tribes around facing it. It was the focal point, it was where God met His people. And God prescribed the way that it was to be carried and it was to be carried by the Levites on poles that were put through the rings and well-intentioned as it may be, sticking it on a cart was a violation. And Uzzah, also well-intentioned, wanting to make sure it didn't fall when the cart was jostled, reached out to touch it and God took his life. And that is a very sobering thing and it's interesting that you think about this all these years after I wrote that, but playing fast and loose with worship is about as dangerous as things get. Superficial worship bothers me. It isn't just the style issue either, it's the superficiality of it. And I've said this through the years, too, Phil, I expect a manipulated superficial worship in a doctrinally weak church because you can't go up in praise until you've gone down in understanding. You...transcendence is a product of profundity, that's sort of a big word way to say it. The ability to be exalted and worshiped is directly proportionate to the ability to be deep in understanding.

I was talking to a seminary student today down at the Master's Seminary and he said to me, he said, "You know, when you struggle in your own life with your worship, what should you do?" And I said, "You should dig into the Word of God because what it means is that you're not being enriched in the glories and the wonders of God."

If you do not take your people down deep into the truths of Scripture, they will not be able to worship at elevated levels. I'm not talking about singing or anything else, I'm talking about heart worship that eventually is captured in singing. So then what you have is entertainment or some manipulation by the tune and the sound of things to kind of...and call it worship, but real worship...look, I mean, we worship God in the Spirit all the time and it's...I know that you know when you prepare...my richest times of worship are in direct response to my deepest times of learning. I go into the Word of God, sometimes I have to stand up and walk around my office and carry on my own little worship exercise because I'm blown over by what I discover in a passage.

PHIL: That is, isn't it, the very thing that distinguishes worship from mere entertainment, that our hearts respond to the truth of God.

JOHN: Yeah, anything else is a manipulation.

PHIL: Yeah, it's just sheer emotion or...

JOHN: Yeah, or you...and I don't mind music, I love music. I like to have...I like to feel the flow of music and to hear the beauty of music. What a gift God has given us. That's fine. But that may not be worship and it may be but superficial worship which is why the more superficial songs dominate those kinds of worship experiences because people can't think about the subtleties of theology, they can't think deeply about things, and they have a hard time worshipping if it's not in a contemporary style that, you know, it's sort of like you've got to go to a church that gets your groove on.

You know, I asked this question once before and you and I talked about it, and I would pose it again: if God somehow sent an edict down from heaven, and I would make the suggestion, and said, "All music in all churches stops except acappella singing of the people, or even maybe all that stops, all music in the church stops. No more music." The question would be, what would happen on Sunday? Where would the people go? Because I'm convinced that the big hook in the seeker movement is the music.

PHIL: Well speaking of that, some of the...some of the seeker-movement churches and in fact, some of the best known ones have gone beyond just contemporary prayer and praise choruses and they've even begun to integrate secular music into...

JOHN: Oh sure.

PHIL: Into their services. I have a friend who went to one of the large ones and he said that the music they played during the offertory was the *Eye of the Tiger* from *Rocky III*, the movie. Just a secular song. And I was relating that to someone and he said, "Oh that's nothing. I went to a seeker-sensitive church and the music they played during the offertory was Pink Floyd's *Money*."

JOHN: Well, I've said this before, there's only one seeker in the church and that's God who seeks to have true worshipers who worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

PHIL: Well, in fact, that was the whole theme of *The Ultimate Priority*, based on John 4.

JOHN: And, Phil, as you know, this isn't going to stop. There's another movement beyond the seeker movement now, it's called the Emerging, or the Emergent Church, inevitable, predictable. It had to happen. In fact, we've talked about that fact in the past. Look, there are only three possibilities. Number one, is you teach biblical doctrine from the Bible. Okay? That's one option, that's the golden age of the church. You teach the Word of God. You teach biblical truth in its biblical context. The departure from that is the second step, you still teach biblical doctrine but you redress it, put the Bible

aside, people don't want to hear the Bible, they can't relate to the Bible, and none of those stuffy Bible things. You know, we package it, you know, in a sermon about the Chicago Cubs, or a sermon about milkshakes or whatever. And so you say, "But we're true to the Bible, we're true to Christ and it's biblical doctrine, it's biblical truth." Albeit superficial, shallow, like *The Purpose Driven Life* which is like Christianity 101, basic, basic, basic, basic. And an inadequate presentation of the gospel, it's not that it's full of all kinds of heresy but you can get a shallow representation of biblical doctrine. And, of course, as you know, in there he uses about 15 different Bible translations to find the one that says exactly what he wants the thing to say. So you do get...you can say, "Well, yeah, they're holding on to Bible doctrine," that's step two. But it never stopped because now the culture is the issue, now you have decided that the crowd is there because you figured out how to push their buttons.

So step three is this, first one again, teach the Bible in its biblical context. Second one, you teach Bible doctrine in the cultural context. Third one, the Bible's out, it's the cultural message in the cultural language. And that is the emerging church. That...when I say the emerging church, this is a term that's used to describe this movement that has, you know, appeared now this month on the front cover of *Christianity Today* where seemingly everything troublesome soon appears. The emerging church says, "Forget the Bible, we're not even sure what the Bible means. We don't even want to make the Bible an issue." That's what they say.

PHIL: Is this an outgrowth of all these earlier purpose-driven, seeker-sensitive kinds of styles?

JOHN: Absolutely, absolute. Look, it's the old question, don't tell me where a person is, tell me what direction they're going so I know where they're going to end up. This is where you end up. If the culture's going to define your church, eventually you're going to soften the doctrine, right? You have to. You can't...I mean, you heard Joel Osteen who now has the biggest congregation in America and he says, "I'm not going to preach on sin." Why? Because then he won't have the biggest congregation in America. So where's that going to go? You know, he wants to make people feel good and be happy and he fills a former, was a former sports arena, the Houston Rockets, or something like that? So eventually....but the first thing he says in his sermon, he holds up a Bible, and everybody in the whole congregation says some thing they've all recited, "This is my Bible...ta-da, ta-da," and they all hold their Bible in the air. So they're going to say, "We believe in the Bible and what the Bible teaches," but what he says is not biblical and it's only nominally theological. And the next step is to say, "Forget the Bible, we're not even sure what the Bible means." This is Post-Modernism. "We're just here to kind of feel our way along in the spiritual experience and see what happens." And I don't think you can stop that.

And, of course, the next step after that is you just abandon the faith. The church is out. Why bother?

PHIL: Do you see all of this heading toward a split in the evangelical movement? I mean, it seems that there are enough evangelical...

JOHN: No! I don't think it's going to be a split and I'll tell you why. Because everybody is somewhere along the spectrum. It's not as clear-cut as two camps. But I do think there will be a recovery movement. I think there's going to be...there's going to be a group of people, probably not organized, probably not connected, who are going to say, "We are going to be true to the Word of God." That...that's not going to split evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is already split. It is fractured into...well, that's part of that entrepreneurial deal and everybody doing right in his own eyes and all the independent churches all over the map, all over everywhere. It's fractured. I mean, I wouldn't say it's a split, I would say it's an explosion. The evangelical unit has exploded into bits and pieces all over everywhere. But I do think there's always going to be a remnant and a recovery of biblical ministry. Look, what...five years ago we had five hundred pastors at our Shepherds Conference? This year we might have five thousand, why are they coming? They're coming because they're saying, "We want to...we want to be faithful, true to the Word of God." I think that's going to happen. Churches all across America are coming after the graduates of the Seminary because they want guys that will teach the Word of God and will be faithful to the truth and so I think the fragmenting of evangelicalism has already happened. It's just splintered into thousands of pieces. But in the midst of all of this, I don't think it's up to us to try to recover all of that, I just think we hold to the truth. Time and truth go hand in hand. All this stuff has it's little day and then disappears and the truth just marches onward, as it always has.

PHIL: Where do you see these seeker-sensitive mega churches say even fifteen years from now?

JOHN: It would be hard to imagine that there wouldn't be some dramatic changes because they are...they are in some ways the product of their entrepreneur, but they're so highly organized that, you know, they're like an airplane at a cruising altitude that, you know, the guy can sort of put it on auto-pilot and sit back. So I think there's a sense in which these machines...the machinery of these things will go on for a while, the big ones. I think it's the small ones that are going to be in some kind of crisis.

See the challenge is this, where are they going to get the next generation of leaders? Well, sad to say there are still a lot of seminaries around that are still enamored with this movement, and so they're doing whatever...I don't know, what could a seminary do to prepare a guy to do that? But there are still a generation of guys coming out who want to do that kind of thing, so there's going to be some people to fill in those kind of spots. But...and that's such a sad thing. The church has lost its continuity. This is part of its disconnect from the past. I mean, literally, you go to a church, I've preached in churches all across this country through the years, I can go to a church I preached in 20 years ago and not recognize it...not recognize it because they've had maybe two pastors who...who one guy decided he wanted to go into the Charismatic Movement, the next guy he decided he wanted to go into the Willow Creek Movement, and now the church is absolutely in chaos and it doesn't look

or has no identity, it's in this identity crisis. So I don't really know what the future holds. In one sense, I'm more concerned about the true church and the faithful church and trying to build up a generation of churches and of men who are going to be faithful, to be biblical, whatever the style. But that preaching and doctrine will dominate and that the Bible...Bible doctrine will be taught in biblical context through the exposition of the Word.

PHIL: That sort of has been your answer to this all along. I don't know how many years it's been but at least a decade since you published *Ashamed of the Gospel* which was a thorough critique of this whole movement, right?

JOHN: Right. And the people who agreed with me then still agree with me and the people who didn't agree with me then didn't like the book at all. I mean, I am probably now more criticized and resented by that movement...

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

And again, I don't relish this, I'm just, as you know, driven by the truth.

PHIL: But all you're saying boils down to preach the Word in season, out of season, how can you argue with that?

JOHN: Well they are. I mean, if you asked them, are you preaching the Word? Well of course we are. But you have to go back to this definition of preaching biblical doctrine and biblical context, giving the whole counsel of God, taking the people down deep into the truths of Scripture.

You know, we are vast...we are fast becoming an illiterate nation? Do you know the illiteracy rates in America are higher than they've ever been?

PHIL: Really?

JOHN: Yes. We're becoming an illiterate nation. The dumbing down of America is real. And it's happening in the church. Our culture is...is...is being stupefied by what I would call inane media. I mean, look at television, talk about inane, does anybody ever say anything profound about anything? It's all silly, stupid, idiotic from reality TV to sitcoms to...so you've got a dumbing down of everything. And, of course, if you're going to have a cultural ministry, then get ready, you're going to dumb down your whole congregation.

PHIL: Well, in fact, that's...that's what they're deliberately and consciously doing.

JOHN: Sure...sure. You know that there are TV preachers that conduct their sermon like a half-hour TV program. They interrupt it with commercials purposely because they don't think people can capture the content. Look, I've listened to those things, I mean, I'm bored to tears in 30 seconds because it's so over-simplified. But the idea is you say a few things for five, and then you bop over here and somebody gives a commercial about something and then you jump over here and you show a scene somewhere else. And they think people are only able to think in television segments.

We know better than that. People will think whatever way you've trained them to think. And we're not willing to capitulate to that.

PHIL: *The Purpose-Driven Life* and the 40 days of purpose thing has been huge for at least a year now. Everywhere you go you see church billboards and even sometimes completely liberal or mainstream denominational churches advertising the 40 days of purpose thing. What's your evaluation of that whole thing?

JOHN: Well, you know, as I said, the 40 days of purpose book is a very, very basic book about, you know, prayer and evangelism and ...

PHIL: If a young pastor asked you, if he came to you and said, "Look, people in my church want us to do this, do you think there's anything wrong with it?"

JOHN: Let me answer your question this way, Phil. I said that the book is simple, it's almost below the basic level and here is an indication. Okay, at the heart of *The Purpose Driven Life* is knowing Christ. I mean, Rick Warren would say that. Okay, here's what it says in the book. If you want to be right with God, here's what it says, "Believe, believe God loves you and made you for His purposes. Believe you're not an accident. Believe you were made to last forever. Believe God has chosen you to have a relationship with Jesus who died on the cross for you. Believe that no matter what you've done, God wants to forgive you." Have you ever heard any gospel presentation like that? Where is the resurrection? Where is the...

PHIL: Where is the meaning of the cross, even?

JOHN: Where is the meaning of the cross?

PHIL: Does it say anything about sin?

JOHN: Well then...no, the next one says, "Receive Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior. Receive His forgiveness for your sins. Receive His Spirit who will give you the power to fulfill your life. Wherever you're reading this, I invite you to bow your head and quietly whisper the prayer that will change your eternity. 'Jesus, I believe in You and I receive You. Go ahead.' If you sincerely meant that prayer, congratulations, welcome to the family of God."

PHIL: Wow!

JOHN: Now you talk about minimalistic. What in the world is that? You're saying that *The Purpose Driven Life* is based upon a true relationship with God? Mormons could say that. Jehovah's Witnesses could say I believe in Jesus, I receive Him as whatever. Certainly Roman Catholics can say that. I'm sure liberals could say that, that they believe in the Spirit of Jesus. There's nothing about the resurrection there. There's nothing about the significance and meaning of the cross. There's nothing about repentance. There's nothing about confession of Jesus as Lord. There's nothing at all about, most importantly, self-denial. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself." Nothing about taking up your cross, paying the price.

Then it says, "You're going to need a little support. If you e-mail me I'll send you a little booklet, *First Steps for Spiritual Growth*." See, this is symptomatic of the whole deal. So what...if that's the gospel, then what kind of people are in that church? What kind of people are in that church? What kind of people are in *The Purpose Driven Program* if that's all they know? So, you know, that's what I'm saying about it. You would have to take that book, if you're going to do 40 days of purpose in your church, and literally expand it so that it is biblical and amend it and delete from it those things that are not biblical. What do you need to believe to be a Christian? Well there were about eight things there that you need to believe, none of them was, if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, none of them. It's just like...it's the vagaries of it and it's the, I guess, the shallowness of it and the misleading character of it, believe that God loves you and, you know, be overwhelmed by that love and love Him back and those kinds of things.

PHIL: It's all rooted though back to the idea of a man-centered theology. It's rooted in a man-centered theology, it's the culmination of where twentieth century evangelicalism...

JOHN: Yeah, it's a man-centered theology and it's a very superficial one.

PHIL: Yeah. John, would you counsel a person who is in one of these churches to leave?

JOHN: Well let me respond and maybe this is a good way to wrap up our conversation, Phil. First of all don't become antagonistic, cantankerous, rebellious against the leadership of your church because they had a 40 days thing. Maybe, you know, they just weren't as discerning. You know, maybe they

have come to the conclusion that it had some weaknesses. Maybe they beefed up the things that could be beefed up and maybe they were all well intentioned. You know, be prayerful, be thoughtful, be careful. We're not trying to create a firestorm here, you know, launched from Grace To You to people who can go in and disturb the tranquility of their churches. Just be wise and be gracious. But, you know, when you're asked and you have the opportunity to speak and if you're not asked but you feel that your church is going down this path of the seeker-friendly movement, and I'm sure many of you are in this circumstance right now, I think you need to have...you need to have the courage to ask your pastor, perhaps with others who feel like you do, to sit down and address these issues and talk about them graciously and kindly and lovingly. I don't think you should turn it into a war, a battle. I think you should be patient and very kind and tender-hearted and long-suffering in dealing with these issues. But I know that if you're a part of the Grace To You family and you're in a church like this, you see all of this and you're disturbed by all of it. And it's not just that, you know, the traditions have changed and you don't like the new traditions. You certainly see beyond that. That's not what we're talking about. You're disturbed by the change in the content, the emphasis, the direction of the church, the loss of the preoccupation with God and substituting it with a preoccupation with man. Instead of worshiping God when you come together and exalting Christ, it's as if you are trying to entertain these unbelievers. You see all that. But you need to be patient. You need to be thoughtful. You need to be careful. And I think if you have an issue, you don't want to start a mutiny by spreading it all around with other people. If you have something against your brother, you go to your brother, if it happens to be your pastor or people in leadership, and you address that in a gracious and loving way and register your concern about it. You know, then you wait and see what happens patiently. And don't necessarily abandon your church. I mean, the pattern of this is that there are lots of churches where people who try this leave and you don't necessarily want to all leave before the pastor leaves because it may be better if you're still there and then the next experience of your church with another man might put it more on track. So be patient.

But, you may have to make the decision somewhere down the line. If you have an alternative, I would say it could be simple. If you have an alternative where the Word of God is faithfully preached and taught, and Christ is exalted and God is truly worshiped, and you know that alternative and it's available to you, it's going to be hard for you not to take that alternative.

PHIL: How would you counsel a pastor who's feeling the pressure from people who want to move this direction philosophically?

JOHN: Well, I think you've got to do what's right, but you need to make your case well with Scripture. And the way to do that is not from the pulpit, don't get up in the pulpit and expose the leaders of the church in one of your sermons. You know, don't...don't throw your arrows at him in a public environment. I think that what you do is you sit down with these people that are putting this pressure on with the leaders of the church, hopefully you've gotten the leaders of the church on your side who

are ready to do that because you've opened the Word of God, you've made these things clear, and you sit down and you say, "Here are the biblical issues, and this is why we feel the way we do." And clarify those biblical issues so that the people who are tending to push you in that direction understand those issues.

And it does come down to your theology. It really does. And if they understand what the Word of God teaches and you can show them that, then you're on solid ground.

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