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| <b>EDITORIAL</b><br><i>D. A. Carson</i>  | 1  |
| <b>MINORITY REPORT: The Way of the Christian Academic</b><br><i>Carl Trueman</i>   | 5  |
| <b>The Gospel and the Poor</b><br><i>Tim Keller</i>  | 8  |
| <b>Shared Intentions? Reflections on Inspiration and Interpretation in Light of Scripture's Dual Authorship</b><br><i>Jared M. Compton</i> | 23 |
| <b>The Center of Biblical Theology in Acts: Deliverance and Damnation Display the Divine</b><br><i>James M. Hamilton Jr.</i>               | 34 |
| <b>Salvation History, Chronology, and Crisis: A Problem with Inclusivist Theology of Religions, Part 2 of 2</b><br><i>Adam Sparks</i>      | 48 |
| <b>PASTORAL PENSÉES:</b><br><b>Ezra, According to the Gospel: Ezra 7:10</b><br><i>Philip Graham Ryken</i>                                  | 63 |
| <b>Book Reviews</b>  | 69 |



THE GOSPEL COALITION

# EDITORIAL

— D. A. Carson —

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**T**he apostle Paul writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). Elsewhere he tells the Corinthians, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Thinking differently from the “world” has been part of the Christian’s responsibility and agenda from the beginning. The language Paul uses intimates that this independence of thought will not be easy. The assumption seems to be that the world has its own patterns, its own structured arguments, its own value systems. Because we Christians live in the world, the “default” reality is that we are likely to be shaped by these patterns, structures, and values, unless we consciously discern how and where they stand over against the gospel and all its entailments, and adopt radically different thinking. More: our response must not only be defensive (Rom 12:2), but offensive, aiming to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God,” aiming to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Neither Scripture nor experience suggests that this will be an easy task. Transparently, one of the things needed is substantial discernment, since some things the world thinks are not intrinsically bad (in the Reformed heritage, this is commonly seen to be the fruit of “common grace”). More difficult yet, the challenges are not vanquished once, enabling us to coast. Until the end of the age, the “world” continues to exist, and it keeps launching its challenges from constantly changing angles. When Christians who had suffered through two centuries of waves of Roman persecution faced the stunning reality that the Emperor now declared himself to be a convert, they were faced with the temptation to re-think what political “victory” looked like, what structures controlling Christian influence in the corridors of power might achieve—and thus to re-think the nature of the kingdom. Doubtless Matt 20:20–28 seemed less relevant than reflections on the life and times of King David. Moreover, decisions of the same sort played out again and again, across centuries, until there was an imperial papacy, and beyond.

Choose your own historical examples. Probably the most difficult “patterns” of thought to identify as things to which we should not be “conformed” are those in any culture that the overwhelming majority in the culture think are pretty obvious, but which stand either tangentially skewed with respect to, or totally opposed to, the gospel. Most of us look back on the temptations toward ascetic and gnostic movements in the second and third centuries and marvel that so many people who called themselves Christians were taken in. But the most dangerous movements in any age are those that are so widely assumed that it is very hard to see them. It is easy to discern and denounce yesteryear’s blind spots, and even feel vaguely superior because we are able to do so; it is far more difficult to discern our own. And to these big “world-viewish” structures of thought must be added the rippling recurrence of the many temptations to avarice, pride, sexual libertinism, and lust for power.

All this is the common reflection of Christians across the centuries. Certainly I have tried to think about these matters periodically throughout my adult life; most of us have. Recently, however, two things have forced me to probe them more than I have before.

(1) Writing the book *Christ and Culture Revisited* forced me to ponder a little more seriously the way Christians are simultaneously part of a culture and set over against it, how they are influenced by the culture for good and ill, and influence it in return, likewise for good and ill.

(2) Increasing reflection on the sheer speed, volume, and democratic openness of the Internet prompts guarded thanks for access to useful information, and sheer horror at the potential for abuse and corruption.

(a) One cannot help but be thankful for the way the Internet can disseminate vast quantities of useful information, how books and other sources once available only in the best libraries are now, for countless hundreds of millions of people, only a click away.

(b) Equally we ought to be thankful for the way independent voices on the Internet sometimes puncture the pretentious or plainly false claims of the major traditional media. Granted, as Lord Acton insisted, that all power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, one does not like to see too many news sources falling into too few hands. The Internet is gloriously irreverent to the major traditional media. I am not suggesting that Internet information is intrinsically more reliable than information disseminated on television or in newspapers and weekly journals; I'm merely saying that multiplication of sources of information is more likely to ensure freedom and truth than entrusting all the sources of information distribution into too few hands.

(c) But there are many downsides as well. The sleaze and trash on the net are stupefying. Porn, for example, was certainly not invented by the Internet, but the Internet makes it constantly accessible to everyone. Some reports say that more money is now spent in western countries on porn than on tobacco, alcohol, and hard drugs combined. What is this doing to human relationships, to marriages, to the gift of godly imagination?

(d) Because the Internet is spectacularly accessible, almost anyone can voice an opinion or make a claim. In this sense, it is the most "democratic" of the media. Occasionally this means that voices otherwise silenced, voices that should be heard, are indeed heard. Much more commonly, voices multiply that are ill-informed, opinionated, often pretentious and arrogant. A higher percentage of these voices were weeded out when the distribution was via print, radio, or television; by democratizing the delivery system, every voice can be published, and it becomes culturally unacceptable even to suggest that some voices are not worth publishing. This does nothing to enhance either discernment or self-discipline. As Michael Kinsley likes to ask, "How many blogs does the world need?"

(e) Much more interesting, and more difficult to predict, is the phenomenon called "groundswell" (see esp. Charline Li and Josh Bernoff, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* [Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008]). Opinions and responses coagulate and drive topics and evaluations in uncontrollable and largely unpredictable directions. This can foster openness; alternatively, what is perceived to be a cultural consensus on some matter or other may simply be wrong.

(f) The speed of the Internet is stunning. A few years ago I was attending a meeting of pastors, most of us with our laptops out taking notes during the complex discussions, when the chap next to me turned his screen to me and invited me to read what was there. About fifteen minutes earlier he had said something to the group. What he had said was summarized and sent by another member of the group to his associate back home. The associate blogged the information, and that blog was picked

up by an RSS feed that brought the information to the blog of one of the assistants of the chap beside me. That assistant emailed his boss, and there was the question on the screen: “Did you really say that?” Amusing, even fun—but such speed is encouraging us to bash out responses before we’ve heard another side, before we’ve had time to evaluate, before we’ve pondered whether or not it is wise and godly to respond at all, before we’ve cooled down and been careful in our choice of words. When you set out to write a book, a good editor fosters such virtues, but most blogs pass through the hands of no editors, and graceful communication is not thereby enhanced.

(g) Scarcely less important than speed of access is the Internet’s sheer intoxicating addictiveness—or, more broadly, we might be better to think of the intoxicating addictiveness of the entire digital world. Many are those who are never quiet, alone, and reflective, who never read material that demands reflection and imagination. The iPods provide the music, the phones constant access to friends, phones and computers tie us to news, video, YouTube, Facebook, and on and on. This is not to demonize tools that are so very useful. Rather, it is to point out the obvious: information does not necessarily spell knowledge, and knowledge does not necessarily spell wisdom, and the incessant demand for unending sensory input from the digital world (says he, as he writes this on a computer for an electronic theological journal) does not guarantee we make good choices. We have the potential to become world citizens, informed about every corner of the globe, but in many western countries the standards of geographical and cross-cultural awareness have seriously declined. We have access to spectacularly useful information, but most of us diddle around on ephemeral blogs and listen to music as enduring as a snowball in a blast furnace. Sometimes we just become burned out by the endless waves of bad news, and decide the best course is to turn the iPod volume up a bit.

One more example of a slightly different sort: In a recent fascicle of *First Things*, Joseph Bottum and Ryan T. Anderson write a fascinating essay titled “Stem Cells: A Political History.” They carefully chart the way the story has been told by the media since 2001 when President Bush *allowed* the use of federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research. That’s right, he *allowed* it; no president before him, including Clinton, had done so. Bush did restrict the use of federal funds to previously established stem-cell lines, largely because he was afraid of the dehumanizing effects of simply harvesting stem cells from embryos. Meanwhile, private companies could experiment as they wanted. The next six years stirred up a torrent of opprobrium. Bush was against science, people were not going to be cured if he continued to have his way, and so forth. The detailed documentation provided by Bottum and Anderson is captivating. Then, using mice, Shinya Yamanaka demonstrated that fully pluripotent stem cells could be created directly from adult cells. By November 2007, two independent teams published the results of their work showing that human pluripotent stem cells could be produced without using embryos, cloning, or human eggs. The story dropped away from the front pages of the media. Nor do these same media now report how the small but genuine advances made in stem-cell research—for instance, in MS, lupus, and scleroderma—at least in the US, have almost without exception sprung from work with adult stem cells. The “spin” on the story has shaped public opinion: conservatives oppose stem cell research, and liberals are for it. What Carl Trueman calls “the wages of spin” shape not only what we think is newsworthy, but our ethical reflection and our perception of what is for the public good.

These precise challenges never faced Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Turretin. But what does it mean not to let the world squeeze us into its mold in the opening decade of the twenty-first century?

I shall not here review the Christian resources God has kindly lavished on us to enable us not to conform to the pattern of this world. If we are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, then we must be reading the Scriptures perennially, seeking to think God’s thoughts after him, focusing on the

gospel of God and pondering its implications in every domain of life. We need to hear competing voices of information from the world around us, use our time in the digital world wisely, and learn to shut that world down when it becomes more important to get up in the morning and answer emails than it does to get up and read the Bible and pray. We may also learn much from church history, where we observe fellow believers in other times and cultures learning the shape of faithfulness. We begin to detect how easily the “world” may squeeze us into its mold. We soon learn that adequate response is more than mere mental resolve, mere disciplined observance of the principle “garbage in, garbage out” (after all, we are what we think), though it is not less than that. The gospel is the power of God issuing in salvation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and living in the shadow of the cross and resurrection, we find ourselves *wanting* to be conformed to the Lord Jesus, wanting to be as holy and as wise as pardoned sinners can be this side of the consummation.

