

# Expose the Shepherds of Death, and Engage the World for the Shepherd of Life

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Using themes drawn from Psalm 49, Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, president of Westminster Seminary in Calif., and professor of church history, told the attendees at the Ligonier conference on The Christian Mind that “we’ve sought to defend and build up the Christian mind by looking at the Bible, theology, philosophy and worldview. Today we look from the perspective of history.”

Following the reading of Psalm 49, Godfrey remarked that “the psalmist confesses that life is a bit of a riddle; and a riddle is a question to which the answer is not immediately obvious.” He noted that there are “many riddles in life” but one “recurring riddle: Why do the wicked prosper?” And then reframing it, Godfrey asked, “Why does the course of history run the way it does? Why do there seem to be times when there is a great knowledge of Christ and then other times when the truth of Christ seems shrinking and He seems more despised by a world passing by?”

Godfrey acknowledged that “We’re left with questions when we look at the course of Western history over the past couple of centuries in the presence and influence of Christianity – when the number of Christians is rising, why is the power of cultural formation so significantly declined – and why is Christian thought not considered a powerful thought form that must be

dealt with?” He noted sadly that “other thought forms seem to be the future; we seem to be the past.”

Taking a hard look at history, Godfrey admitted that “Christians have a lot to answer for,” including the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition.

Godfrey said that “Post-modern people know little about the Bible and theology but they have their list of offenses of Christianity.” So, Godfrey said, “We should face up to it. We have a more than occasional history of violence, oppression and injustice – we do have things to answer for.” He noted, “We should not run away from that. We are a religion that believes in sin.”

Then he turned the table, saying “It is time for a bold engagement with post-Christian thought in terms of how they’ve done historically.” Godfrey challenged those present to ask a post-modern advocate how their ideas have worked out historically.

He listed a litany: “What about that wonderful outcome of Hegalianism called Communism, how did that work out? Communism is a post-Christian organization of life on scientific principles designed to get rid of oppression with the hope of an everlasting utopia. How’d that work out?”

Quoting Margaret Thatcher, Godfrey quipped, “The problem with Socialism, you eventually run out of other people’s money.” Godfrey then said, “Karl Marx convinced people that his ideas were valid science. I am sure he was perfectly sincere in his heart. He was sincere and people followed him passionately. But it didn’t work – and it didn’t work right from the beginning.”

Turning from Marx’s ideas to Joseph Stalin’s application of those ideas in reality, Godfrey said, “Millions of Russians and Ukrainians starved as Stalin took food from the farms to feed the cities. In the name of a post-modern utopian idea, he killed millions of his own people.”

Godfrey then drew from Psalm 49 verse 14, saying “What was Joseph Stalin? He was a shepherd of death to millions of people in the name of post-Christian scientific utopian ideology.”

Then the church history professor said, “Stalin wasn’t the only one. There was another post-Christian scientific ideology. It was going to build a Reich to last 1,000 years.” He was obviously referring to Adolph Hitler.

Godfrey said of Hitler, “He was not a monster, he was human. He was not insane, he had an ideology. He had a post-Christian scientific utopian ideology that some races are superior to others – that the fittest should survive, that the weak should perish that the strong might prosper.”

Begging the question, Godfrey asked, “If there is no god and might is right ... if there is no transcendent God and there is no transcendent, no ultimate purpose, no ultimate morality, then why shouldn’t the strong have their own way?”

Unpacking the Nazi philosophy from the inside, Godfrey said, “it’s an ideology that made perfect sense and Adolf Hitler led his followers to hell. He was a shepherd of death. He, too, was responsible for the deaths of millions and millions and millions of people.”

But do not judge them too harshly, lest you judge all the post-modern ideologues of our own time. Godfrey said, “They were not monsters, they were evil men who followed an evil ideology that rejected God and rejected His Christ.” Then he said, “I think that those who deny Christian ideology should have to face their history and recognize candidly what is wrong.”

Equipping his audience for the anticipated response that critics will give, Godfrey said, “Christians can rightly say that the offenses of history are due to a mis-application of Jesus and His message. We have to press on the post-moderns, did Stalin and Hitler, really and fundamentally fail to follow out the implications of modern thought? Is there really no moral responsibility?”

“If so,” he continued, “then we are just animals – and what do animals do? The strong kill the weak and we all go down to death eventually.”

Then he said, “This is not new. Read verse 12 of Psalm 49 which was written 2,500 years ago.” It says, “But man, despite his riches, does not endure, his is like the beasts that perish.” Godfrey said, “People may get rich, they may build palaces, they may name countries after themselves but death is their shepherd and they are remembered no more.”

Ignorance of the great powers of this world who have made a name for themselves is rampant and where they lead is not bliss.

The danger today, Godfrey points out is “not that every non-believer is a communist or a Nazi.” The danger is that “they are moral people who have borrowed from Christianity a morality for which they have no foundation.” Mortimer Adler called the same thing building life on the shadow of shadows. Jesus called it sinking sand.

Ultimately, Godfrey pointed out, it comes to a question, “Who will be your shepherd?”

He offered two: “The good shepherd who gives life and coherence to life in this world and also provides the promise of eternal life; or the shepherd of death who leads down only to the grave, destruction and forgottenness.”

Casting a vision of life with the good shepherd is what being a living demonstration of the gospel is all about, Godfrey said. So, he asked, “what vision of this life as well as the next life can Christians hold up as an alternative to post-modern experience and post-modern work?”

Godfrey gave the call that “we, as Christians, have to engage more than we have done. We have wonderful resources to defend the Scriptures and exposit the Scriptures for our people and for others — Amazing resources to help us think theologically. But when we move beyond the realm of theology and begin to think in other areas of this life, how are we doing in engagement?”

Godfrey offered Abraham Kuyper, born in 1837 as a worthy model.

Kuyper observed of his own time “we no longer live in the Middle Ages.” Godfrey said that “by that profound but simple statement,” Kuyper “meant that we, as Christians, were no longer in charge.” That was not a bad thing, Godfrey admitted, since the church had “used the coercive power of the state” to oppress many.

Turning toward today, Godfrey said, “The fundamental reality is that we’re still not in charge and we’re not likely to be in charge. So, how do we have a voice without just trying to restore the old Christendom?”

Kuyper is a good model because not only did he live in a crease in history like our own, but he was a skeptic. Godfrey noted that “being a skeptic did not keep him from becoming a minister – still true today.” How then was he converted? Godfrey answers, “In his first parish, there were some pietistic folks – they told him that they did not attend church because the church did not teach them the Word of God so they stayed home and read reliable Dutch writers like John Owen. Little did they know, what they actually had were Dutch translations of [English] Puritans.”

Kuyper was converted by the witness of the laity in the church he pastored. He cultivated three core convictions, none of which was original to him.

1. Individuals have to be changed. Regeneration makes us new creatures in Christ.
2. Ideas have to be changed. Regeneration isn't just something that happens to the soul and the heart, it happens to the mind.
3. Institutions have to be changed. A regenerate person cannot be satisfied to live in a corrupted world. He must apply the full force of his life toward that which groans in eager longing for man's redemption.

Godfrey said, “We are different – we have a new mind and a new heart – and that informs everything else.”

Godfrey then rattled off a litany of accomplishments of Abraham Kuyper, the new man in Christ and for Christ in the world:

- Kuyper left the ministry to enter politics because he believed that a Christian voice was needed there.
- He established a daily Christian newspaper.
- He established a weekly Christian devotional called the Herald.
- He established a political party in the name of Reformation for Christ.
- established a university which became a bulwark of Calvinistic thinking because ideas need institutional legs to make an impact.
- He established a new denomination.
- He established a Christian labor union.
- He encouraged Christian day schools at grammar and high school level.

- He wanted to bring something of the witness to Christ in daily society.
- He served as prime minister of the Netherlands. This was not just a fringe or splinter movement.

Godfrey concluded saying, “Kuyper was the right person at the right time with extraordinary blessing from God – but he also labored in remarkable ways.”

Godfrey said that Kuyper observed that “This world is abnormal. He confronted the post-Christian idea that this world has evolved naturally and therefore is normal. He confronted the ideas that death and inequality are normal. Kuyper said, “This is not normal! This is not what God intended! It is abnormal and it is a result of sin, a result of the fall!”

Godfrey quoted Kuyper who said, “The way modern thought is going, we are going to end up either with societies where the state becomes tyrannical and runs everything or we are going to end up with societies where the individual is a tyranny and destroys all institutions.” Godfrey noted that communism has led to the first and America to the second.

Godfrey then said that “we only avoid this by recognizing that God alone is sovereign, and God has created spheres of responsibility – the state, the family, the church – and each is responsible to God.”

Godfrey noted that the witness of “Kuyper calls us to engagement,” and that engagement is distinctively Christian.

In conclusion Godfrey said, “May God grant that we all have that assurance, that confidence and that joy. Not to build a name for us in this world but to be assured that we are not men in their pomp without understanding who will not remain – for we know the shepherd of life.”

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