

# CHAPTER FIVE

## WHATEVER: IDEOLOGY

As has been suggested, the counterculture was not so much ideological as it was emotional and sensory. The young people wrapped up in it reacted against the prevailing culture and its ideology. The twentieth century was a century of ideological competition as a variety of politicoeconomic systems vied for the allegiance of the human race. The systems offered a new integrating “truth” that transcended ethnic, racial, and national boundaries. They arose from the collapse of imperial monarchy after World War I. Until then a few empires controlled most of the world. A century earlier they had controlled the Western hemisphere, but as they lost control of the Americas, they gained dominance in Africa and Asia.

As Christendom began to fade, ideology helped give form to the new modern era. In the late-Middle ages, the peasants revolted in a number of different regions in England, France, Germany, and Italy. Religious belief and political aspiration flowed out of Christendom as an interrelated unity. At the end of Christendom, people did not think of religion and politics separately; they were together as one thing. That unity of church and state was part of the legacy of Christendom. We see the Protestant Reformation going forward in relationship to the church, but at the same time the princes of the old Holy Roman Empire were developing the idea of the nation state. Political sovereignty, independence, and the establishment of their own nations developed along with the separation from Rome. These ideas moved forward together. In the English Reformation where the Puritans wanted to

go further in a reformation of the Church of England, there was also the political struggle between the divine rights of kings, advocated by the Stewart monarchs, and parliamentary democracy advocated by the House of Commons. Politics and religion were inextricably related as causes of the English Civil War. Historians throw up their hands in trying to distinguish between these different issues. Ideology that called for war and the overthrow of government was often derived from an interpretation of the book of Revelation, as with the Anabaptists of Munster and with the Fifth Monarchy Men of England, who wanted to overthrow Charles II as soon as he got back to England.

With the Enlightenment, however, in the 1700s people no longer needed a religious justification for their political aspirations. The way they thought no longer required God to be involved in the affairs of nations. Deists like Thomas Jefferson made vague references to God and a natural order, but the French Revolutionaries could carry out their aims without any polite reference to God at all.

Monarchy had emerged over seven thousand years of recorded history as the political system of choice. The Greek city-states experimented with a form of democracy three thousand years ago. Rome had ended monarchy before the birth of Christ, only to take it up again. England abolished monarchy in 1644 only to take it up again in 1660. The French abolished their monarchy and, like the English before them, cut off the head of their king. Like the English before them, however, they returned to monarchy with first an emperor and then a king. In 1848 they threw off monarchy again, only to turn a second time to an emperor before ending monarchy for the third time in 1870. The Chinese revolution of 1911 ended the ancient monarchy. The great collapse of monarchy, however, finally came with the disaster of World War I. All over the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, virtually the entire world was controlled by a very small number of global empires. By the end of the twentieth century, those empires had fragmented to more than two hundred member nations in the United Nations.

At the beginning of World War I monarchy was the dominant form of government, and women played no part in politics. Great empires with majestic dynasties played a personal game of international politics. The czar ruled the Russian Empire as an absolute autocrat. The sultan ruled the Ottoman Turk Empire of the Middle East. The emperor ruled the Chinese Empire. The kaiser of the old Hapsburg dynasty ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The new German kaiser manipulated the newly created quasi-constitutional German Empire. The king-emperor reigned over the constitutional British Empire. The king ruled over the disintegrating Spanish Empire. The smaller kingdoms of Belgium, Holland, Italy, and Denmark



controlled smaller, but often very lucrative colonial empires. In the Far East the mikado of Japan ruled the island empire that longed for territorial expansion beyond its Korean possessions and Chinese spheres of influence.

Even the new democracies followed the lead of the old order. Though discarding her emperor, France retained her colonial empire. Even the United States established an empire in the Caribbean, Central America, the Pacific Islands, and the Philippines. It would take fifty years after the end of World War I for the new order to give up most of the colonial empire of the old order.

As monarchy was collapsing, ideology was emerging. In the twentieth century we could call it the struggle of ideology. We saw the emergence of fascism in Germany, Spain, and Italy. We saw the emergence of Communism in Russia and China and their satellite nations. We saw the alliance of the great democracies Great Britain, the United States, and their allied English-speaking people nations (Canada, Australia, and the other Commonwealth nations). It was that tradition, started at Runnymede, that developed into an ideological form of government and economic system known as capitalistic democracy. The battle between political ideologies played out through the rest of the century. Fascism was defeated in its most militant form through war in World War II, but it did not end there. It flourished in Central and South America through the 1950s, 1960s, and the 1970s. It still pops up in Latin America from time to time.

Though the European powers entered World War I to make the world safe for dynastic empires, President Woodrow Wilson promoted the ideal that the allies fought to "make the world safe for democracy." In the same terrible war during which twenty million people lost their lives, the collapse of czarist Russia gave birth to the Soviet Union, a state dedicated to international revolution designed to bring about Communist society. In the chaos left from the political collapse of monarchy in Germany and Austro-Hungary, national socialism would arise to direct the national destiny of the German peoples scattered through a half dozen new nations that appeared on the map. These great systems collided time and again as the century progressed.

With the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, the world saw on a small scale how seriously the ideologies could compete. The monarchy was overthrown by democracy as in Russia. As in Russia, however, a new competition arose to define the nature of democracy. The meaning of democracy became lost in the competition between fascism and Communism. Thus, Spain became a little theater to practice for the great confrontation of World War II, which ostensibly pitted democracy against fascism.

In the great ideological struggle of the twentieth century, different ideologies defined democracy and fascism in different ways. By *democracy* some

meant republican democracy (United States), constitutional monarchical or parliamentary democracy (United Kingdom), or people's democracy (Soviet Union). By *fascism* some meant democratic fascism (Germany), constitutional monarchical fascism (Italy), or imperial military fascism (Japan). Adversaries used similar terms, but they meant entirely different things by those terms. The concept of propaganda became a strategic tool in the conflict between the great ideologies. The Allies defeated the Axis powers in World War II, which redefined the conflict from one between democracy and fascism to one between capitalism and Communism. The former colonies of the old order became the new object of desire in the conflict between Communist Eastern dictatorships and the capitalistic Western democracies. To confuse matters, however, the Western democracies made alliance with fascist military dictatorships and absolutist Middle Eastern monarchies while the Communist dictatorships made alliance with emerging third world democracies.

## IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

We have seen at the end of the century, the collapse of Communism in almost every country. With trade negotiations going on now between the People's Republic of China and the United States, efforts are being made by the Chinese government to bolster the Hong Kong dollar—a purely capitalistic move. We see the slowly emerging collapse of Communism there, but at the same time we see a weakening of what we were fighting for as a capitalistic democracy. We are facing the greatest moral challenge our ideology has ever had—peace. How do you deal with *peace*? There is no major enemy on the horizon. Who are we against now, why are we against them, and what are we fighting for? Without ideological enemies, in a sense, the United States loses its own identity. Throughout the ideological conflict, the United States had defined itself in opposition to the ideologies. Without them the United States began to lose its own identity. In opposition to fascism and Communism the United States could champion life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Without the challenges to life and liberty, the United States was left with only the pursuit of happiness as its great value.

The echo-boomers who are coming of age now have never known the Communist threat. Throughout the twentieth century we dealt with those early foundational principles of life and liberty. We do not have those struggles anymore. All we have left now is the pursuit of happiness. That is the only value that is left in the United States, because without the struggle, without the suffering, without the challenges, life and liberty are not an issue for the average comfortable person. Being comfortable, we are not con-



cerned with the lack of comfort that other people have. It is the dark side of "I am my only authority," and "I do not care about what is outside of me." In terms of labels like "liberal" and "conservative," the new situation defies the categories we used as recently as the 1980s. Perhaps the situation resembles more the old "isolationism" of an earlier America that did not want to get involved.

Christianity embraced the modern fascination with ideology, often closely identifying itself with a political movement or policy. Though Christ resisted the temptation to solve spiritual problems by political means, the church has continued to return to this methodology, thinking that identification with the powerful forces of earth will advance the kingdom of God. It has never happened. It is nothing new. After failing to reform the Church of England, the Puritans united with Parliament to reform the government of England in 1642. The Evangelicals of England used Parliament in 1832 to pass the Reform Bill. It was a good measure, but they lost their spiritual vitality and gradually disappeared as a significant influence in England after that, as they became so associated with a political movement. Christians made alcohol the issue at the turn of the twentieth century. We passed the Prohibition Bill thinking that alcoholism would disappear from the United States. In the 1950s, anti-Communism was a major church theme. In the 1960s Civil Rights and the anti-war movement became the themes. In the 1980s and 1990s moral issues took center stage. It is nothing new for Christian conservatives or liberals to be involved in politics. It is something we do. It has been part of the modern context that we have carried over from Christendom that the church and the state ought to be one. It is a holdover from a thousand years ago.

Conservative Christians achieved a major political victory through their participation in a coalition that ensured the election of Ronald Reagan and George Bush to the presidency. For twelve years conservative Christians had an ally in the White House from 1981 until 1993. They gained political power but virtually lost any remaining influence they had in the popular culture. Christians stood in the ironic position of achieving political victory but cultural defeat as the counterculture generation went mainstream. Christianity began to look like just another ideology that wanted political power.

The church is gearing up for the culture wars. The fact is the culture war is over, and the church was not involved in it. The church was involved in politics but they missed the culture war. The counterculture began in the 1960s. It involved music, art, literature, television, and every cultural art form. Where was the church in relationship to the culture? Totally removed. We were not involved in the culture war. It is long over. We lost it. We gave

it up. If we influence what really matters, which is the culture, then the culture will take care of the politics. But if you try to influence the politicians, you have made a deal with the devil.

Here is my dark side. I helped to train Lee Atwater. The last time I was with Lee Atwater, he was trying to decide which presidential campaign to manage. He had offers from George Bush, who was vice president; Howard Baker, who at that time was no longer majority leader but was chief of staff of the White House; and Jack Kemp who was in Congress. In that conversation, we also talked about the Evangelical Christian Right. He said "We have gotten just about all the good we can out of them, and it is going to be counterproductive to pay too much attention to them in the future." If you look at what actually happened from 1980 to 1997, Christians got nothing of their political agenda, but they lost a great deal. The modern situation reflects what has happened throughout Western history since Constantine. Whenever we have taken the power, we have suffered a major spiritual loss. When the Puritans took power in England, they succeeded in destroying their spiritual vitality. The church in England after 1660 drifted into deism and a loss of influence in society. It did not come back to any strength until the Great Awakening seventy-five years later. It invariably takes an awakening to reverse a secularizing trend.

## THE REJECTION OF IDEOLOGY

What does past experience with ideology say for us in the postmodern age? All of this discussion has dealt with the modern age. The postmodern generation, by and large, has rejected ideology and causes. They have drawn back from them. This response appears as apathy and noninvolvement. Campus ministers talk about the fact that the generation now in college are not interested in causes. They are not interested in joining movements. They are not interested in doing, being, or acting the way previous generations did. Ideologies are too big and too impersonal for them. While they have rejected ideology and involvement in organizations, they have not rejected what Christ created the church to be: his bride, which is a relational idea; his family, which is a relational idea; his body, and that is very personal. The church means total identification with Christ. This relational idea is profoundly, I cannot emphasize it enough, profoundly important for this generation. When the church is an organization, when the faith sounds like an ideology, when we confuse the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God, **THEY WILL NOT HEAR US**. They will not. The church seems like just another organization. The church sounds like more people wanting my money. The church acts like more people wanting my time. Postmodern peo-



ple have never been a part of the church. They have never really heard the gospel. They look at us from afar and wonder. No! They do not even wonder. They are not interested. They recognize propaganda and slogans when they hear them. They are media savvy. They are the ones who are driving the more and more sophisticated approaches to advertisements. They know when they are being sold a bill of goods. They grew up in front of the TV. What we have to do with them is get down and get personal.

## THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

The postmodern generation rejected ideology because it failed to deliver. Ideology has a function within society, and the postmodern generation perceived that it had failed. No one ever called a convention to vote on the success or failure of ideology. The postmodern person simply "dropped out." Causes, movements, politics, and great ideas failed to move them. What does an ideology provide for people that the postmodern generation did not find?

An ideology might simply be described as a body of ideas. Sometimes the ideas fit together tightly and logically into a complete system of thought, like Calvinism. Sometimes the ideas seem more jumbled and loosely connected, like existentialism. One might object to this description with the argument that Calvinism is actually a theology and existentialism is actually a philosophy. Objection noted, but the curious thing about ideology is that it can operate within any sphere of human experience. Marxism may be an economic theory, but few theories have a greater right to the designation of ideology. Democracy is a political theory, but it has had an ideological expression. Freudian psychology merely represents a way of understanding human thought, but for many people it represents an ideology. Ideology can take many different shapes and forms. It can operate in politics, but it can also operate in almost every other field of endeavor. Whenever people think about things, the possibility for ideology exists.

Ideology involves more than merely the collection of ideas. Ideology has a corporate dimension. A collection of ideas only becomes an ideology when it belongs to a group. We may call an ideology by another, less sinister name; such as a "school of thought," or a "literary movement," or simply an "approach." One thing all ideologies have in common, regardless of their field of thought, is the self-understanding of the group that holds to the ideology that they have the truth. An ideology also provides a number of things that people need to survive in the world.

## COMMUNITY

First of all, ideology provides community. When we espouse a set of beliefs, we know that all other right-minded people think the way we do. It makes us wonder at all the people who cannot see things the way we do, because, after all, it is all so plain. We do not need to know the other like-minded people personally in order to have a sense of belonging and acceptance. In fact, the very absence of personal connection, the feeling of minority status, can intensify the sense of belonging to something bigger. When people who share an ideology have personal contact, however, they derive strength from each other and develop a strong sense of community. Ideology is a neutral idea that can develop in different ways. Mother Teresa had certain beliefs about the poor and the dying, which other people came to accept. A community of people who shared her ideas grew up around her. We would not want to call her ideas an ideology, because it does not sound nice. Nonetheless, it was an ideology. Adolf Hitler had a growing body of ideas swirling in his head. As soon as others began to listen to him, his ideas became an ideology. He gathered a community of followers who believed they were the master race. In both cases, the body of ideas forms the basis for the community. In the case of Mother Teresa, a small group of people actually lived and worked together. In the case of Hitler, people lived far and wide; but they came together to share their commonly held ideas.

Obviously, personality plays a part in whether or not one person's ideas will ever become an ideology. Why do some great ideas remain buried in books when other limp or wicked ideas become the foundation for major ideologies. A lot depends upon personality and the needs of the people who take up the ideas. Lee Atwater once remarked to me that there was only room for one ideologue in the White House. He spoke purely in terms of power politics and the problems that personalities and factions can cause in trying to run a government; but what he said relates to the idea of a community of believers who rally around the idea. When rivals present alternative ideas, the community vanishes. In the Reagan White House, Atwater spoke of the "true believers." These are the ones who went to Washington to bring about a change in government and carry out the Reagan Revolution. Everyone else on staff was there to get ahead. Atwater did not count himself as a "true believer." He could easily move from the Reagan Team to the Bush Team. Alliances are temporary; ideology is forever.

From a functional perspective, ideology amounts to the same thing as committing oneself to any person, group, organization, or cause. The World War II generation was great at building organizations. They were great ones for group efforts. They carried out the golden age of the civic club. Whether



the Junior League or the Jaycees, civic groups flourished through the participation of the World War II generation who had learned the value of group effort through the dark days of the Depression and the war.

We miss the point if we think of the World War II generation as “joiners.” They did not join civic groups because they felt a need to belong to a civic group. Joining the civic group provided a way to accomplish the need they felt, but joining an organization was not the need. The organization was a way to accomplish something. An ideology is not just a body of thought. The ideas of an ideology relate to how a person lives, how the world works, how we get from here to the future. At the day-to-day level, organizations provide the mechanism for carrying out an ideology. The World War II generation joined organizations because they cared about something important to the organization. In some way it probably related in a vague way to pieces of an American “ideology” that would include such elements as “get a good education,” “work hard and you’ll get ahead,” “give people a helping hand,” “take pride in (fill in the blank),” “the youth are our future,” and “give back to the community.” Beyond these vague notions of Americanism coming out of the terrible Depression and World War II, others focused on more carefully articulated ideologies of the political left and right that wanted to protect the country from fascism and Communism respectively. People stop joining when they no longer care about what the organizations exist to promote. The postmodern generation did not carry on the tradition of care that mattered to the previous generation. The postmodern generation cares about things, but not things represented by so many of the traditional organizations.

Postmodern people struggle with loyalty or commitment in any form. While they have a strong preference for personal relationship over organizational structure, they struggle with maintaining personal relationships. This trend appears most clearly in the high rate of divorce in Western society. Divorce not only means a separation between husband and wife. It also means a separation of parents and children, the extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and a realignment of friendships once shared by husband and wife. Divorce frequently sends families into financial collapse with the wife and children especially thrown into poverty. At some point, we need to ask what has happened to caring. The problem of divorce and the rejection of ideology are two expressions of the same situation.

The ability to care and to make commitments to what we believe in represent a critical task of adolescent development. This critical area of development helps to fit a person for life and the demands of marriage. Without them, a person cannot live responsibly. On the other hand, without a basic

belief system, people lack the material for developing a sense of commitment and caring about what matters. A person must first know what matters before they can care about it. The idea of community or personal relationship depends upon basic shared values. Without them, people have only self-interest to carry them through life.

Ideology provides one of the basic needs of self-interest, which is community. But as we have seen, community cannot exist for the person who does not care about what others care about. Without commonly held values, people can only look to their own interests. Ironically, people feel the need for community, but without common values.

A clue to the resolution to the problem lies in how anyone learns values to begin with. Tiny children learn values from the people who care for them. Over a process of many years, children learn to value what others value. In the face of the collapse of ideology, Christians have a unique opportunity to start from scratch. They do not have to combat any ideology as they have tried to do for the last two centuries. They can simply follow the model of Jesus Christ who cared about people until they accepted his basis for community, his model of how the world really works, his understanding of what really matters in the world.

## PURPOSE

Second, ideology provides people with a sense of purpose. Ideology sets out a grand understanding of how all of life fits together. This grand explanation of things has been called the “metanarrative.” Every ideology has its own metanarrative to explain life. Freud’s metanarrative can be reduced to sex and guilt. For Freud, sex and guilt explain virtually all of human life. For Marx the metanarrative focused on the historical dialectic that was driven by economics toward the utopian worker’s state. Darwin’s metanarrative reduced life to survival of the fittest. Hitler’s metanarrative exalted the master race.

The metanarrative of ideology ties all of the strands of thought together to give meaning to life. Sometimes, as with Nietzsche, the meaning of life is that life has no meaning. In an odd way, even this view of life gives people an understanding of where they stand and how they fit in. It may be terribly depressing, but it can be cheerfully expressed by the beer ad that tells us to grab all the gusto we can in life because we only go around once. Of course, most people want life to mean more than grabbing for all the gusto we can. Most people even want life to mean more than the survival of the fittest. Most people think that life must mean something and that life must have some purpose, even if we do not know what it is. The existentialist philoso-



phers have said that this quest for meaning represents one of the three great causes of *angst* (profound anxiety) in life.

People need to feel that life has some purpose and meaning. It strikes at the question of the value of life. This chapter has raised the question of value several times, but we will wait until chapter 9 to explore the postmodern attitude toward values. For the moment, it is enough to say that an ideology embraces the values that make ideas important. Ideas only capture our imagination when they somehow fit into our value system and provide a way for understanding what we value in broad terms. Sometimes we experience a conversion from one ideology to another, which also involves the abandonment of one set of values in exchange for another.

But what about the person who has no clearly defined set of values. The shared values of a community represented by an ideology are not available to the person who does not belong to a community. Without the values, a person will tend to lack the sense of meaning and purpose that an ideology provides. One simple trend in modern society has worked against the postmodern generation ever acquiring a sense of community values. A person needs to belong to a stable community to appropriate the values of the community, but in the United States the average family moves every three years. How can we find our sense of purpose when we live disconnected lives?

The problem did not originate with the postmodern generation. The generation that went through World War I had a gut-wrenching time. The war began with all the romance of a novel by Sir Walter Scott or Robert Louis Stevenson. It ended with the maimed bodies of the wretched survivors of trench warfare and mustard gas. Twenty million people lay buried in the fields of Europe. Ideology failed to make sense of the slaughter. People asked themselves Why? The why question is a search for purpose and meaning. People have the inbred need to ask the question. Most of the American soldiers went home after the war and forgot themselves in the party known as the Roaring Twenties, when people devoted themselves to making money. The few who remained in Europe trying to make sense of it all were the expatriates whom Gertrude Stein named "The Lost Generation."

Every generation struggles with the issue of meaning. Ideology provides a cheap and quick way out of the dilemma. Those who buy into an ideology have all the answers provided to them. The postmodern generation, however, is the media-savvy generation that refuses to buy a bill of goods. They know propaganda when they see it. They also know when an ideology is already spiritually bankrupt and living off past success. The past means nothing to the postmodern generation and nobody knows the future, so they want to know what difference something makes today. In that sense, their ideology is pragmatism. They are true blue Americans through and through.

They want to know what works. Especially, they want to know what works for them. Their ideology and their value system are one and the same. The good, the true, and the beautiful is that which works for them.

On the surface, this situation seems to represent an impossible situation for the church. It means that each individual is only concerned for what works for him or her, rather than in universals. We cannot speak to this generation about rival ideologies and inconsistencies between worldviews and ever hope to get anywhere. On closer examination, however, a different picture appears. The tremendous power of ideologies over the minds of individuals has suddenly grown pale. We do not have to deal with the competing claims of a system. We only have to deal with the gospel's ability to provide meaning and purpose to life. We can be even more specific because we are dealing not with an idea but a person. We only have to deal with the ability of Jesus Christ to provide meaning and purpose to life.

Some will view this analysis as crass and crude for stressing what people might get out of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Surely, we ought to have purer motives for deciding to follow Jesus Christ. One of the most important theologians of all time took this position. Pelagius argued that people can clean themselves up. The church immediately recognized this view as a damnable heresy. The fact is that no one comes to Christ from pure motives, because no one has pure motives until Christ makes purity possible. Everyone comes to Christ through need. Perhaps Augustine expressed this experience best in his *Confessions* when he said, "Our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee."

## IDENTITY

Third, ideology provides people with a sense of identity. The question of identity has a close relationship to the question of meaning, but identity asks, "Who am I?" This question also appears as one of the great developmental tasks of adolescence. People who lack a sense of identity lack self-confidence and the ability to relate well to other people in life. Ideology provides people with an identity by providing them with an easily understood label. Our identity is wrapped up in our ideology. Thus, he *is* a Democrat. She *is* a feminist. They *are* environmentalists. This feature of ideology does not mean that ideology represents the only way to label people and provide an instant identity. We label people many ways. Ideology, however, represents a way people can acquire a new label when they have outgrown the one that was imposed on them.

As we grow up, other people impose labels on us that identify us. We are identified as the child of Jim and Mary, the younger brother of Jack, the



granddaughter of Bill and Susan. We are labeled in the education process by our intelligence (smart, stupid), our appearance (fat, slim), where we attended school (good school, bad school), and on the list might go. Ideology presents an opportunity for people to redefine themselves. In primitive times, a person was defined in terms of the relationship to the tribe. In modern times, ideology provides the new tribal identity. One should note that with the collapse of modernity and the rejection of ideology, in many areas of the world people have reverted to the old tribalism. We see this trend expressed most clearly in terms of which group is killing whom in the ethnic clashes around the globe.

The Christian understanding of creation and being made in the image of God has some important implications for the whole issue of identity. These basic understandings of what it means to be human involve the uniqueness of each person in terms of creation, yet the sense in which each individual has as a part of his or her identity a common relationship to one another and to God. By creation, we understand that we are made separate from God, but by virtue of our creation in the image of God, we share something in common with every other person and that common point has to do with God. Ideology does not touch the essence of a person and that person's essential identity, but creation in the image of God does touch the essence of a person. Thus, we can never truly know ourselves and have a true sense of personal identity without knowing the God in whose image we are made. We will always struggle to know who we are until we know in whose image we are made.

## THE LOST AND FOUND DEPARTMENT

Though the postmodern generation seems to have rejected ideology and its metanarrative, it continues to struggle with the questions that ideology attempts to answer. Jesus Christ offers answers to these questions. The postmodern person is not so much interested in the ideological framework or institutional structure that Christians may present as being interested in knowing if Jesus Christ "works." Does he pass the pragmatic test.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ addressed these same questions when he described what it means to be "lost." In fact, he described his mission in terms of seeking and saving that which was lost (Luke 19:10). Zacchaeus did not belong to the community. His identity had been defined in terms of his collaboration with the enemy. Jesus gave Zacchaeus a new identity by drawing him into the small community that centered around Jesus. Zacchaeus found the meaning to his life in terms of his relationship to Jesus.

Postmodern people will probably not become Christians by hearing that they can find meaning, identity, and community through Jesus Christ the same way Zacchaeus did. That sermon is to remind Christians that Jesus provides these things. Postmodern people become Christians by coming to know Christ the same way Zacchaeus did. He had heard enough about Jesus that he genuinely wanted to know much more. The final step in his conversion, however, was highly relational. He had heard the teachings of Jesus, but he had to experience the personal ministry of Jesus.

The greatest responsibility of followers of Christ in any generation involves carrying on the ministry of Jesus in such a way that people see Jesus through them. The three parables he told about what it means to be lost emphasize this fact. In this sense, Christ means for the church to be the lost-and-found department of planet Earth. Each of the three parables in Luke 15 ends with the community rejoicing together over what has been found. Something is lost when it is out of its intended context, when it cannot carry out its purpose because of separation from where it is meant to be.

The story of the lost sheep emphasizes that each individual has worth and meaning to God. Once again the issue of value, particularly the value of people, arises. People experience lostness in the sense that they feel something is missing in life. They often go off “in search of themselves.” At the end of the Vietnam War, hoards of young Americans went off to Europe in search of themselves. I went too, though I went to see Europe. I reasoned that if I wasn’t where I was, then I couldn’t very well find myself where I wasn’t. Yet, people spend their lives searching for the missing ingredient to make life worthwhile. Empires have been conquered and great fortunes acquired all to find the missing thing. Jesus suggests that we are what is missing. We are out of place in relation to the One who gives life meaning.

The story of the lost coin suggests that God feels the loss caused by our absence. For something to be lost, it must have value to the one who has the right of possession. For this reason, God experiences human loss even more than we do. These stories more than any other passages in the Bible help me understand why God came into the world. God cares about what is lost.

The story of the lost son suggests that all people must decide for themselves if they want their meaning and identity to be tied up with God. Some people change their minds in the course of life. The son did not make a pure decision to return to the father. He made a pragmatic decision. His survival depended upon it. In returning to the father, however, he becomes a part of an entire community that rejoices with the father. In fact, each of the three parables as well as the story of Zacchaeus ends the same way. A group of people rejoice with the one who has regained what had been lost. God is the loser when people are lost. The sad part of the story is that one person who



had been hanging around the father all along did not care about what the father cared about. The elder son did not share the father's heart. The elder brother could not rejoice.

It is not hard to condemn postmodern people because they do not fit any of the acceptable Christian ideologies. They do not fit the mold. They go against the grain. They do not belong. It is not hard to love the old ideology more than the one for whom Christ died. It is not hard to confuse the old ideology for the old, old story of Jesus and his love. It is not hard to confuse the institution for the Savior. It is not hard to miss the point.

With the rejection of ideology, however, Christians have an opportunity to present someone who has the answers to life's perplexing questions. Nature abhors a vacuum. We should not assume that the apathy we call the rejection of ideology will continue as a characteristic of whatever the next great age will be. If Christians do not offer the clear option of Jesus Christ, people will find some new and terrible ideology.