



# New Life in the Wasteland





## Dedication

Since these lectures were delivered in Scotland, it seems appropriate to dedicate them to three Scottish ministers, whose lives and preaching from three decades ago still push my own ministry in a heavenward direction:

**To:** The Reverend James Philip,  
Minister Emeritus,  
Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland, Edinburgh

**To the memory of:**

The Reverend William Still,  
late Minister of Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, Aberdeen

and

The Reverend Donald Lamont,  
late Minister of St Columba's Free Church of Scotland, Edinburgh

*'whose faith follow...'* Hebrews 13:7 (AV)



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**2 Corinthians on the Cost and Glory of  
Christian Ministry**




*'So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you'*  
2 Corinthians 4:12

**Douglas F Kelly**

**Rutherford House  
CHRISTIAN FOCUS**





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## Foreword

One of the bonuses as Warden of Rutherford House over the past ten years has been the annual pleasure of accompanying our distinguished Rutherford House Week speakers in their travels from one Scottish city to the next. It has been a great blessing to have fellowship with them as, beginning early each morning, we have eaten up the miles on the road to the day's engagements. Added to that delight has been the far greater privilege of then sitting at each speaker's feet, listening to them ministering to ministers at the morning gatherings and expounding the Word of God to the friends of the House in the evenings.

Not least memorable of these hectic weeks of meetings was the year when our guest speaker was Professor Douglas Kelly of Reformed Theological Seminary, North Carolina. Douglas spared nothing of himself as he poured out his heart each morning to the goodly company of those who came looking for encouragement and sustenance in that highest of callings – preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. It was as a pastor that he spoke to pastors.

This little book has brought back fond memories of his moving ministry. In his thirteen addresses Dr Kelly showed himself to be fully in touch with our current secular culture; clearly he was acutely aware of the immense challenge every preacher faces today. But he also revealed a heart on fire for the glory of God, and he preached as one with a passion to declare the living Word. I believe nothing of that fiery passion has been lost in the preparation of the manuscript for publication, drawn as it has been from the sound recordings made of each address.

The Second Letter to the Corinthians was well chosen for a series



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of addresses to those in full-time Christian ministry. My only disappointment at the time the addresses were delivered was that each gathering heard only one of the expositions. My prayer is that the geographical limitation of Douglas' ministry will be made good by this publication: now the entire week's labour in the gospel can be put into the hands of many more than those who came to benefit from the gifts God has entrusted to his servant.

Within this book, the reader will find a rare model of expository preaching. Faithful to the text, Douglas brings the meaning of the great themes of 2 Corinthians right into the twenty-first century. He demonstrates that Reformed theology is completely relevant to contemporary culture. His is the gift of lifting the great apostle's thoughts and experiences and transferring them into 'light' and 'salt' for the church today. This is a book for ministers about their congregations; it also a book for congregations about their ministers! Indeed, it will be a hard heart that is not deeply moved and renewed by the reading of *New Life in the Wasteland*. Pastors will be inspired to pray for their people, and believers will be driven to pray for their pastors!

I want to express my profound thanks to Douglas for his ready co-operation in checking the revision of the manuscript. Also my thanks to Alison Carter who with patience and meticulous care undertook the groundwork of that revision. Those of my staff at Rutherford House who have been involved in preparing this volume for publication join with Douglas Kelly in praying that God will graciously use this book for his glory and for encouragement of his people.

David C Searle  
Rutherford House, Edinburgh  
August, 2003

## Decaying Western Culture

*The context of contemporary ministry*

T S Eliot titled one of his works *The Waste Land*. Much of our Western culture seems to be just that: a barren desert, denuded of life by 'the acids of modernism', ill prepared to cope with the challenge of resurgent Islam, and now even more confused by the contradictory complexities of philosophical pluralism spawned by post-modernism. Into this moribund, desert-like culture, the Christian church is called to minister nothing less than resurrection life. Of our best efforts we may ask at times with Eliot:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

Always bearing in mind what makes the corpse sprout, it is important to stand back a while as we enter the third millennium after Christ, and contemplate just what is the position of the gospel ministry today, in view of our deeply diseased Western culture.

### **Contemporary culture**

Granted the severe limitations of our fallen human minds – some of the darkness of the Fall is still present even in the redeemed understanding – one has to be careful, humble and provisional in attempting to state precisely where God’s pilgrim church is on her journey home. We cannot always judge by the superficial appearance of the church, because historically and theologically it is so often true that God is doing the most when things look the very worst. As Christ says in John 12:24, ‘Unless a corn of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.’ Often when the church seems buried and things seem most discouraging, God is working profoundly beneath the surface; I do not doubt that is happening in our culture in more respects than we may know today. Nevertheless, bearing this limitation of the human viewpoint in mind, we need to consider the duties and the possibilities of Christian ministry in what so many people call the ‘post-Christian culture’. God has providentially called us to be born in this culture; he calls us to serve him gladly in the only place we can serve God on earth, not to long for some earlier or later culture.

When the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century, a new religious periodical, which still continues, was started in New York City. It was optimistically entitled *The Christian Century*, emblematic of the whole thinking of the Protestant churches of that time. In a glorious sense that has been true in many areas outside the Western world – in parts of Korea and Africa, for instance. We thank God that for many of those places, it has indeed been the Christian century. Yet in our historically Christianised Europe and America, I do not think many could doubt that the twentieth century has been the opposite of the Christian century for our cultures. To an appalling degree, Europe, Britain and the United States have become secularised and paganised, prosperous though we have become. I suggest that the root of the problem of the secularisation



of the West is a theological and spiritual one – that we have turned from the living, triune God to the service of idols.

*An ineffective church*

The last forty years have seen the British culture moving away from the gospel held by our forefathers; in the United States we have experienced exactly the same cultural shift as has been seen in Britain. From the 1960s to the 90s we have seen a massive secularisation of American life. Oddly enough, church attendance is still as high in most of the United States as it was in the 1920s and 30s. Recent statistics from a secular polling organisation indicated that about 42 percent of our population still frequent some kind of a church on any given Sunday. The strange fact is that American church attendance, impressive though it is, seems to have had very little influence on the actual culture. It has been unable to reverse the slide into secularism and paganism that is inundating the American culture, just as it is in Britain where church attendance is less than 10 percent. Thus we have to question the effectiveness of gospel ministry and church life on both sides of the Atlantic.

*A disintegrating culture*

I do not believe it would be very hard to convince most observers, whether they were conservative, liberal or moderate, that our society in the West is profoundly diseased. For a correct diagnosis, one must first be able to know the signs of good health, both physical and mental. Then you can more accurately spot what is wrong. It is the same with counterfeit money; banks train people to spot counterfeits by having them observe closely and repeatedly true pound notes, euros or dollar bills. Similarly, in order to diagnose what is wrong, we must first ask the question, ‘What is the proper wholesome relationship of human beings with Almighty God?’

If we wish to summarise the entirety of the written Word of God, surely we could say that both the Old and New Testaments are

covenants. The two parts of this book are bound together by the concept of God's one covenant of grace with sinful humanity in sovereign mercy: he plans that we should be his, allows the Fall, puts human beings as part of the plan, intervenes as the trinitarian God in his redemptive mercy, and ultimately sends down the new Jerusalem where he will be our God and we will be his people. By his inexplicable grace he chooses to be our God and he chooses us to be his people.

The essence of the covenant of grace is that we know God, as we see in Jeremiah 31:31-34, taken up in Hebrews 8:6-11; he is our God and we are his people and as such we know him. When the culture is rotting and breaking down, it is because the people do not know God. The word 'know' must be given its full biblical sense of personal relationship, intimate trust, deepest fidelity, tenderest communion. The Authorised Version of Genesis 4:1 tells us that Adam 'knew' his wife and they had offspring. The Lord Jesus says in John 17:3, 'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.' Salvation and health are ultimately *knowing* God. The sanctity of the human marital relationship is a reflection of this most precious and crucial form of 'knowing'.

### **A definition of idolatry**


Essentially this is the disaster of our culture, that instead of knowing God, our people know idols. We are called to minister in a time that is characterised by idolatry more than anything else, and this was the problem at Corinth too. What is idolatry? It is a vicious, heartless rejection of the noble, generous and tender Lover to whose infinite mercy and affection the otherwise helpless beloved owes absolutely everything. That is how God sees idolatry. That is why he reacts against it so powerfully and sent a whole people into captivity for it.

It is described very vividly in Ezekiel 16. There God found an abandoned baby of pagan parents, fresh from her own unwanted

birth, still wallowing in blood in the open field, where she had been left to die alone. Of course, in our day where we are more progressive, this baby girl would have already had her life terminated in an abortion clinic and been burned in the incinerator. But in more primitive times, she was just abandoned. God takes her up and washes her, nourishes her, clothes her, bringing her up with royal care until at length she becomes a beautiful young woman whom he takes as his wife. This, of course, is a foreshadowing of Christ's love for his church in Ephesians 5:23-32.

However, this beautiful but thankless young woman trusted in her own beauty (not unlike Lucifer himself, who at the dawn of time seems to have fallen because he was enraptured with his own splendid appearance). Rather than gazing on the face of her true, noble Lover, she focuses on herself so that her love is transmuted into lust; Ezekiel 16:15 says: 'You lavished your favours on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.' Her illicit sexual pleasures were, as they still are today in every sinful relationship, subject to the law of diminishing returns. As with drugs, you have to do more to get the required effect. The further her whoredoms went, the more degenerate she became. She ultimately stooped to the low point of hiring enemy nations and paying them to sleep with her (Ezek. 16:33). God's judgement upon his whoring wife would be national disaster: 'Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewellery and leave you naked and bare. They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords. They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers' (Ezek. 16:39-41).

A hundred years before Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the book of Hosea describes the national degeneracy of the idolatrous northern kingdom of Israel, illustrated by the personal unfaithfulness of



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Hosea's adulterous wife, Gomer. She went from bad to worse, plunging to such depths of lust and depravity that finally she had to be sold into the debauched slavery of actual prostitution. Eventually, in the amazing love of God, her husband goes and buys this totally unworthy person back. This incident gives us hope for any culture, I believe.

*An idol-ridden culture*

A crucial principle about the nature of idol worship is that persistent spiritual idolatry leads to intellectual and physical adultery, then on to other kinds of mental and sexual perversion. It is important to note here that there are more kinds of idolatry than literally bowing to images of Baal, or taking part in orgiastic rituals in the groves of Ashtoreth. If we do not realise this, I think we will not be able to analyse properly the ravaging cancer of our times and the culture in which we have to minister, raise our own children and live our own lives. Because we may not see actual idol statues, we must never imagine that our culture is idol-free.

Let me illustrate what I mean about the multi-faceted nature of modern idolatry. Professor Herbert Schlossberg has written a perceptive book entitled *Idols for Destruction – the Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture*. He classifies an idol as any value or principle that men substitute for God. He shows that there are two general kinds of idols – idols of nature and idols of history. He shows that these idols of whatever description inevitably lead to the destruction of those who follow them, echoing the words of Hosea 8:4, 'They make idols for themselves to their own destruction.' God must judge that culture which turns its back on him and bases its life on false gods, defined as some other kind of value that is put in his place.

The Bible, history and contemporary life all illustrate that spiritual idolatry and intellectual treason inevitably lead to widespread sexual degeneracy. What is the reason for the amazing sexual emphasis of

our culture? The relationship between idolatry and adultery is complicated, but the basic connection is clear. Intellectual rejection of God and sexual immorality are very closely intertwined; one may say of them what John Calvin says in Book 1 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* about the human personality's knowledge of self and its knowledge of God. Calvin says that our knowledge of self and our knowledge of God are so profoundly intertwined that psychologically it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends and which one comes first. Perhaps the same is true in regard to the matter of idolatry and adultery.

The question is this: do people commit wholesale adultery because they have grown cold on God, like a marriage going sour? A husband or wife does not usually seek out another partner if the marriage is successful and warm; they go outside if it has gone cold. So, do people commit wholesale adultery because they have first grown cold towards God or do they reject God (as we see the intellectual and cultural leadership of our countries trying to hold back the evidences of God's reality in what they report in the media) precisely in order to commit adultery and other forms of sexual licence? Which is first? Thomas Aquinas may have been pointing in the right direction when he said in the thirteenth century: 'Unchastity's first-born daughter is blindness of spirit.'

### **Robbing the Creator of his glory**

In the inspired analysis of the apostle Paul in Romans 1:18, 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress [literally "hold down"] the truth by their wickedness.' In other words, it is not that our culture does not know there is a God, and does not have some kind of a moral monitor in their conscience. They do, and they know far more than they are willing to let on, which is one of the encouragements in preaching the gospel. When you preach the Word of God, even to a liberal, cynical, sarcastic person, there is something in them that

they are not entirely able to cancel out. Paul builds a case that the reality of God's existence and holy demands on all people may be clearly perceived from creation about us and conscience within us. But because of our sinful hearts, instead of truly knowing and glorifying God (Rom. 1:21) we pervert our Creator's glory and replace him with corruptible idols from the idol factory of the human mind. God then gives such an idolatrous culture up to 'the sinful desires of their hearts' (v. 24). The appalling personal and societal consequences of this blindness of spirit which is the first-born daughter of unchastity, are catalogued in Romans 1:26-28.

One of the most brilliant analyses of the empowering of the sexual licentiousness of modern Western culture by its theological apostasy and intellectual idolatry, was given years ago by Jean Brun who is now Professor Emeritus at the University of Dijon, in a book entitled in French *Le Retour de Dionysius* (*The Return of Dionysius*). The same theme was taken up in a book of much insight, published in 1993, entitled *Degenerate Moderns – Modernity As Rationalised Sexual Misbehaviour* by an American Roman Catholic, E Michael Jones. Although the last chapter, in my view, totally misrepresents the life and teaching of Luther, I believe this book gives us a great deal of insight into why our culture is where it is, and can even help us know how Christian ministry, with the grace of God, can reverse it.

*Conforming truth to desire*

This is what Jones says: 'There are ultimately only two alternatives in the intellectual life. Either one conforms desire to the truth, or one conforms truth to desire.' That is, truly to know God entails mortification of lust. As we mortify lust by God's grace with the help of the Holy Spirit, then that is succeeded by daily resurrections to something higher and better in one's personal existence. But on the other hand, those who refuse to conform their desires to the truth, are like Ephraim in Hosea 4:17-18: 'Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone! Even when their drinks are gone, they


continue their prostitution; their rulers dearly love shameful ways.' They lower God and then deny God, all the better to replace him with new gods who will not rebuke them for morally collapsing before the onslaught of their own lusts.

Paul Johnson has written an interesting biography of the largely immoral leaders of our modern intelligentsia entitled *The Intellectuals*. These three authors – Brun, Jones and Johnson – demonstrate that the latter course, the conforming of the truth to human natural lust, has been the story of Western civilisation since the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, which was based so heavily on seventeenth-century English deism. This shows the uncomfortable and disturbing fact that ours is an idolatrous culture because it is an adulterous culture. Well might Hosea 4:17 be written on the lintels over the mighty doors of universities, broadcasting networks, publishing houses, stock exchanges and halls of civil government: 'Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone!'

*Rationalised misbehaviour*

Jones states it bluntly: the thesis of this book is simple – modernity was rationalised sexual misbehaviour. All the intellectual and cultural breakthroughs of modernity were, in some way or other, linked to the sexual desires their progenitors knew to be illicit but which they chose nonetheless. Their theories were ultimately rationalisations of the choices they knew to be wrong. Jones goes into details from Margaret Meade, talks about some of the things in the life of the liberal theologian Paul Tillich, and describes the morals of the Bloomsbury group, Freud, Kinsey and others. He regards as plausible the claim that there is only one generator of urban modernity in the West – sexual licence, of which homosexual practice is merely a subset.


The sexual immorality of Cairns, Strachey, Forster and the Bloomsbury group of the 1920s in Cambridge was presumably restricted to a relatively small elite in Western culture. But what




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was hidden in the 1920s has come out of the closet and is now stalking the streets of our cities, our schools, media and art. The ethics of the closet could not have moved to the moderatorial chair on centre stage, as it were, had not our idolatrous-adulterous culture constantly adjusted its views of truth to conform to its unmortified lusts over the last seventy or eighty years. If Brun, Johnson, Schlossberg and Jones are right, it is because of unbridled lust that our late twentieth-century culture is so deeply sunk into the depravity that always follows the blindness of spirit, which increases the longer idolatry is practised.

These lines written by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* say a great deal:



Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,  
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;  
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.



Decades ago, Carl Mannheim, a German sociologist, stated, 'Civilisation is collapsing before our eyes.' 'If God is dead,' said Dostoyevsky, 'everything is permitted.' I believe that a large part of God's judgement on our idolatrous culture is to let it take the logical consequences of the horrendous choices it has made in abandoning him, the framework of his saving gospel, and his holy, secure law.

Sections of the church have played a large part in this drift away from God. C E M Joad saw that the Church of England was being transformed by the process of accommodating the views of naturalism and materialism. He accused it of becoming a mere purveyor of vague, ethical, religious uplift. Once G K Chesterton said of America, 'It is a nation with the soul of a church.' 'Yes,' replied Alistair Cooke, 'it's true, but it also has the soul of a whorehouse.' The Old Testament reminds us that when prophet and priest are corrupted, cultural disaster cannot be far behind. Amos says there





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is no famine like a 'famine of hearing the words of the Lord' (Amos 8:11). Yet no matter how bad our cultural collapse, God can change it; his gospel is competent to handle it, as we shall see in our study of Paul's Second Letter to the Church in Corinth.

