

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper, Session 1, Cultural Context

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Theology Proper or God. This is session 1, Cultural Context.

Even before we start talking about the doctrine of God, let us seek God.

Gracious Father, we come before you through your Son in the power of the Holy Spirit and ask you to bless us, teach us, encourage us, lead us in the way everlasting, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

No doctrine is more fundamental than the doctrine of God. You could argue that the doctrine of the scriptures is more fundamental, and as a matter of fact, I wouldn't challenge that, but the doctrine of God is a very fundamental doctrine, shall we say.

In terms of modern errors, so many things are built on an over-emphasis on God's supposed love and a downplaying of His holiness or justice, for example. On the positive side, we need to give time to think about who God is, the fact that God has eternally existed as the Holy Trinity, and that He has attributes and qualities. He made us in His image and we share in part some of His qualities, others we don't share at all, but it is worth thinking about and meditating on the qualities or attributes of God.

Lastly, we hope to get, we plan to get to the works of God, His works of creation and providence, with a mere mention of redemption and consummation, because they're the prophets of other courses. So, let us begin with an introduction dealing with modern and post-modern culture, where we are, and how we need to understand the doctrine of God better. I'm indebted to David Wells, who in his fifth book in this area of addressing the culture and the need for God to be heard speaking through His word in the culture and the message about Christ crucified and risen and coming again, David Wells' fifth book is *God in the Whirlwind*, God in the Whirlwind, the center of reality, he says.

The first challenge, then, that we have in trying to even understand the Bible's teachings on God has to do with our culture. Anthony Thistleton famously wrote a book called *The Two Horizons*. There's the horizon of the text of the Bible, there's the horizon of the interpreter.

Frankly, I have emphasized the former my whole career, but those who are just outstanding communicators of Christian truth, I think of John Stott and David Wells,

who fuse both horizons, surely emphasizing the word of God but teaching the word of God to influence, to be understood in the culture and to influence those who are in the culture, because we are, and cultured, we can't help it. The first challenge, then, Wells writes, has to do with our culture. How is it that our culture may get in our way of knowing God as he has revealed himself to be? Let's begin with a baseline truth of scripture.

It is that God stands before us. He summons us to come out of ourselves and to know him. This is the most profound truth that we ever encounter, or should I say, the most profound truth by which we are encountered.

Wells is a Calvinist. And it is the key to many other truths, and yet our culture is pushing us into exactly the opposite pattern. Our culture says we must go into ourselves to know God.

This is the cultural question that we must begin to understand because otherwise, it will shape how we read scripture, how we see God, how we approach him, and what we want from him. Here we go. Real faith, that is, faith of a biblical kind, has always had a subjective side to it.

That is not in question. When we hear the gospel, it is we who must respond. It is we who must repent and believe.

It is the Holy Spirit who works within us supernaturally to regenerate us, to give us new life where there was only death, new appetites for God and his truth, where before there were none, joining us to the death of Christ so that we might have the status of sons. And not only the status but also the experience of being God's children. We have received, Paul declares, the spirit of adoption as sons, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God. All this, of course, is internal. And in that regard, it is subjective.

It takes place in the depths of our soul, and it encompasses all that we are. In no way are these truths being doubted when I say that God stands before us and summons us to come out of ourselves and know him. But what does it mean to say God stands before us? That he is, in a sense, objective to us? Well, says, let's begin at some distance from the Christian faith and slowly work toward the center, where we really want to be.

Along the way, we'll be thinking about how our experience in this pressured, filled, affluent, globalized culture shapes our understanding of who God is and what we

expect from him. God is out there somewhere. That God is before us will seem like an unexceptional statement.

When some people hear these words, they may only think that God exists and that he is in our world. In the West, the number of those who believe in God's existence has usually been in the 90-97% range. 90-97.

In 2013, though, only 80% of Americans put themselves in this category in a Pew study. Nevertheless, when those who subscribe to the new atheism mock this belief in God's existence, a delusion, according to them, as Richard Dawkins calls it, an anachronism, as Peter Steven Pinker declares, Steven Pinker declares, and just a set of fantasies, says Sam Harris, they find themselves outside the mainstream in all our Western cultures. Furthermore, about 80% of people in the West also consider themselves to be spiritual, in quotation marks.

Remarkably, this is true even in Europe, where the processes of secularization have run very deeply for a very long time. But the real question to ask about belief in God's existence is this. What weight does that belief have? The US Congress had the words, In God We Trust, placed on our paper currency in 1956.

But it also is clear that this belief for many is a bit skinny and peripheral to how they actually live. They believe in God's existence, but it is a belief without much cash value. To say that God is before them, therefore, would be somewhat meaningless.

It does not necessarily have the weight to define how they think about life and how they live. Indeed, one of the defining marks of our time, at least here in the West, is the practical atheism that is true of so many people. They say that God is there, but then they live as if he were not.

How a person thinks about God, Paul Fries, and Christopher Bader show in their America's Four Gods, that what we say about God and what that says about us is shaped by their answers to two other questions. First, does God ever intervene in life? Second, does God ever make moral judgments about what we do and say? If we answer both of these questions yes, then saying that God is before us will mean something entirely different from what it would mean if we answer these questions in the negative. If we think that God has a hands-off approach to life, how we think of being in the presence will be one thing.

If we think he has a hands-on approach, it would be something quite different to contemplate what it means to be in his presence. Should we then think of him as a landlord who keeps the building in repair but does not interfere in the lives of those who live there? Should we think of him more as a cheerleader who shouts encouragement from the sidelines but is not himself in the game? Or a therapist who

always maintains an arms-length relationship with the patient so that the analysis is not skewed by one who knows that in the end, it is the patient who must right his or her own ship? Should we think of God as being nonjudgmental, one who keeps his thoughts to himself? This is a direction in which our culture is pushing us. God does not interfere.

He is a God of love and he is not judgmental. The other angle here is how much God cares about our weaknesses and failures. Indeed, how much does he know and what weight does he give to different failures? Ours is a day in which information about the world, about its wars, tragedies, sufferings, and hatreds is instantaneous and simultaneous.

We are becoming knowledgeable through TV and the Internet of everything of significance that happens. And a whole lot of what is entirely insignificant, too. This raises some interesting questions in our minds.

Given the often cruelties that go on in the world, does God really care about our own private, comparatively small peccadillos? Does he get bent out of shape by a little moment of deceit here or there when we're simply trying to avoid embarrassment? Is it so terrible to tell a lie if there is no malice? How about a sexual weakness that we cannot resist? Or a little self-promotion that drifts loose of the facts? Does he obsess over these private failures? Does he really care? Or is he large and generous, and does he overlook what we are powerless to change? Is he not more preoccupied with cheering us on than with condemning us? This, too, is where our culture wants to take us. We hear this cultural way of thinking even being echoed in the church. Joel Osteen, pastor of America's largest church audience, not to mention his worldwide following of 200 million, takes us down this road every week.

In his saccharine-like views, God is our greatest booster, who sadly is frustrated that he cannot shower us with more health, wealth, happiness, and self-fulfillment. The reason is simply that we have not stretched out our hands to take these things. God really, really wants us to have them.

If we do not have them, well, the fault is ours. Actually, Osteen's message is not much different from the way that a majority of American teenagers think about God today. In his soul-searching, Christian Smith has given us the fruit of a large study he conducted on our teenagers.

It was released in 2005. What is really striking in this study is Smith's finding that the view of God is dominant among a majority of these teenagers. He calls it moralistic, therapeutic deism.

The dominant view, even among evangelical teenagers, is that God made everything and established a moral order, but he does not intervene. Actually, for most, he is not even Trinitarian. The Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ play little part in church teenage thinking, even in evangelical teenage thinking.

They see God as not demanding much from them because he is chiefly engaged in solving their problems and making them feel good. Religion is about experiencing happiness, contentedness, having God solve one's problems and provide stuff like homes, internet, iPods, iPads, and iPhones. This is a widespread view of God within modern culture, not only among adolescents, but among many adults as well.

It is the view of God most common in Western contexts. These are the contexts of brilliantly spectacular technology; the abundance churned out by capitalism, the enormous range of opportunities that we have, the unending choices in everything from toothpaste to travel, and the fact that we are now knowledgeable of the entire world into which we are wired. All of these factors interconnect in our experience and do strange things to the way we think.

Most importantly, they have obviously done strange things to how we think about God. Indeed, Ross Douthat, in his *Bad Religion*, speaks of this as a pervasive heresy that has now swept America. He's quite correct that most people would not think of heresy in this way.

However, what so many Americans think about God is a distortion of what is true. As a distortion, it is a substitute for the real thing. That is why it is heretical.

So, why are people thinking like this? Let me take a stab at answering what is no doubt a highly complex question. Again, I'm indebted to David Wells for this cultural analysis, which is plainly not my forte. But I need it.

A paradox. This context, this highly modernized world, has produced what David Myers calls the American paradox. Actually, this paradox is not uniquely American.

It is found throughout the West. And increasingly, it is being seen outside the West. In prosperous parts of Asia, for example, the same thing is becoming evident.

And this paradox leads naturally into the predominant view of God. So, what is the paradox? It is that we have never had so much, and yet we have never had so little. Never had we had more choices, more easily accessible education, more freedoms, more affluence, more sophisticated appliances, more cars, better houses, more comfort, or better healthcare.

That is the one side of the paradox. The other side, though, is that by every measure, depression has never been more prevalent, anxiety higher, or confusion more widespread. We are not holding our marriages together very well.

Our children are more demoralized than ever. Our teens are committing suicide at the highest rate ever. We are incarcerating more and more people, and cohabitation has never been more widespread.

In fact, in 2012, in America, 53% of children were born out of wedlock. This new norm is a sure predictor of coming poverty for so many of those children. This paradox is not entirely new.

When Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman, visited America in the 1830s, he noticed that although quite a few people had become well-to-do, there was also among them a quote, strange melancholy. They had attained an equality with each other at a political level. However, on the social front, almost everyone knew someone who had more than they had.

Political equality did not produce equal outcomes in terms of wealth and possessions. That, at least, is how Tocqueville explained that melancholy that he saw. Whether this was the real explanation is not really important.

What is important is that abundance is not necessarily an unblemished, unqualified blessing. We should, of course, know that because that is what Jesus said a long time ago. However, today, this cultural paradox is exceedingly aggravated and we are in quite a different place culturally than the America that Tocqueville saw almost two centuries ago.

Many therapists are now finding that this paradox has worked itself into the lives of those who come to see them. Among those are many who are younger. They often report that though they grew up in good homes, had all they wanted, went on to college, perhaps entered the workplace, they are nevertheless baffled by the emptiness they feel.

Their self-esteem is high, but their self is empty. They grew up being told they could be anything that they wanted to be, but they did not know what they wanted to be. They are unhappy, but there seems to be no cause for their unhappiness.

They are more connected to more people through the internet, and yet they have never felt more lonely. They want to be accepted, and yet they often feel alienated. Never have we had so much.

Never had we had so little. That is our paradox. This two-sided experience is probably the best explanation for how so many people, teenagers and adults alike, are now thinking about God and what they want from Him.

On the one hand, the experience of abundance, of seemingly unlimited options, of opportunity, of ever-rising levels of affluence, almost inevitably produces an attitude of entitlement. Until recently, each successive generation has assumed that it will do better than the previous generation. Each has started where the previous one left off.

This expectation has not been unrealistic. This is how things have worked out. It is not difficult to see how this sort of entitlement naturally carries over into our attitude toward God and His dealings with us.

It is what leads us to think of Him as a cheerleader who only wants our success. He is a booster, an inspiring coach, a source of endless prosperity for us. He would never interfere with us in our pursuit of the good life, by which we mean the pursuit of the good things in life.

We see Him as a never-ending fountain of these blessings. He is our concierge. Purveyors of the health and wealth gospel, a gospel, in quotes, that's being exported from the West to the undeveloped parts of the world, seem quite oblivious to the fact that their take on Christian faith is rooted in this kind of experience.

Had they not enjoyed Western medical expertise and Western affluence, it is rather doubtful that they could have thought that Christianity is all about being healthy and wealthy. At least in the Church's long, winding journey through history, we've never heard anything exactly like this before. What appears to be happening is that these purveyors of this so-called gospel have assumed certain goals in life.

To have the desired wealth and sufficient health to enjoy it. Faith then entitles them to get these things from God. Where this kind of Christianity has been exported, for example, to many countries in Africa, this is the faith that is being advertised.

This is so quite literally. When leaving the airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, a few years ago, I noticed a billboard with a simple question. It asked, do you want to get rich? Below that question was a telephone number that I was told belonged to a health and wealth ministry.

In many African cities, in fact, there are miracle centers where the afflicted pay a price and go in to get their miracle. At least they are assured that a miracle can be had. The temple money changers so angered Jesus that he physically tossed them out of the building.

But we take their modernized progeny in the health and wealth movement in our stride. They just blend into our consuming societies and our expectations that God is there at our beck and call. They are simply part of the vast, sprawling evangelical empire.

While it is the case that we moderns have had this experience of plenty, it is also the case, and this is the other side of the paradox, that our experience of plenty is accompanied by the experience of emptiness and loss. We carry within so many deficits a sense of life's harshness, frustrations at work, bruised and broken relationships, shattered families, an inability to sustain enduring friendships, lack of a sense of belonging in this world, and a sense that it is vacant and hostile. So we look to God for some internal balm, some relief from these wounds.

We become inclined to think of God as our therapist with a capital T. It is comfort, healing, and inspiration that we want most deeply, so that is what we seek from him. That, too, is what we want most from the church experience. We want to be comforting, uplifting, inspiring, and easy on the mind.

We do not want Sunday, or perhaps Saturday evening, to be another work day, another burden, something that requires effort and concentration. We already have enough burdens and struggles, enough things to concentrate on in our work week. On the weekend, we want relief.

It is not difficult to see then how this two-sided experience, this paradox, has shaped our understanding of God. It leaves us with a yearning for a God who will come close, who will walk softly, who will touch gently, who will come to uplift, assure comfort, and guide. We want our God to be accepting and non-judgmental.

It also leaves us with the expectation that somehow this God of plenty will dispense his largest and generous dollops to us, maybe even through a lottery win. Perhaps we could win Powerball, or maybe some sweepstakes prize. That is the kind of God we want.

That is what we expect him to be like. God disappears within. Again, I'm reading these long excerpts from David Wells' *God in the Whirlwind*, because I think they're so appropriate to help us understand where we are.

They are no substitute for the teaching of God's Word, but they help us understand the need for the teaching of God's Word. And we ourselves have not been absolutely protected from any of these thoughts. Certainly our families and loved ones, children and grandchildren, for example, have been affected by some of these currents within our culture.

God disappears within. This attitude, as we've been arguing, probably grows out of our experience. But our experience rests on nothing less than a shifting of the tectonic plates beneath our Western societies.

It is the end product of at least two closely related mega-changes that have been underway in our culture since at least the 1960s. They are first that in our minds, we have exited the older moral world in which God was transcendent and holy, and we have entered a new psychological world in which he is only imminent and loving. This is the framework in which we now understand everything.

This means that the changes in our way of seeing things that are rooted in our experience will now be confirmed in our cultural context. Second, we're now thinking of ourselves in terms not of human nature but of the self. The self is simply an internal core of intuitions.

It is the place where our own unique biography, gender, ethnicity and life experience all come together in a single center of self-consciousness. And every self is unique because no one has exactly the same set of personal factors. It's no surprise that we're now inclined to see life to understand what is true and to think of right and wrong in uniquely individual ways.

We each have our own perspective on life and its meaning and each perspective is as valid as any other. And none of it is framed by absolute moral norms. This is where the overwhelming majority of Americans live.

These changes I try to describe in my *Losing Our Virtue, Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, one of David Wells' five important books. Although the lost moral world and the emergence of the new self can be described separately, they actually happen together, and each fuels the other. Let us pursue this briefly.

In the 60s, when these cultural changes were afoot, they seemed quite radical. This was at the heart of the insurgent new left. The influential books at the time, such as Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture* and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*, were an attack on enlightenment rationality as if, as the Enlightenment supposed, our reason is entirely unbiased.

But the other side of that message was an unrelenting preoccupation with the self with its intuitions and states, and this, of course, went hand in hand with the way culture was working on people. What had begun in the radical new left in time morphed into the commonplace assumptions of the postmodern world. This radicalization became mainstream, and out of this came what Philip Reif called the psychological man.

This is the person who's stripped of all reference points outside of him or herself. There's no moral world, no ultimate rights and wrongs and no one to whom he or she is accountable. This person's own interior reality is all that counts and it is untouched by any obligation to community or understanding from the past or even by the intrusions of God from the outside.

The basis on which lives are being built is that there's nothing outside the self on which they can be built, and this self only wants to be pleased. It sees no reason to be saved. This is a therapeutic deism whose morals are self-focused and self-generated.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, the words that came into vogue to describe all of this were individualism, narcissism, me generation, and the age of Aquarius. It was the time of transcendental meditation and Jesus Christ superstar. It would provide the grist for books such as Tom Wolfe's brilliantly acidic novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

This novel depicts New York in the 1980s through the lens of four tawdry characters who have no higher good than their own self-interest and really no self-other than that which they project in their appearance. They are vain and empty. They're nothing but a collection of poses and self-projections.

It'd be parallel later by Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street*. This movie followed the lives of some Wall Street traders who were driven solely by greed and who inhabited a totally amoral world. In some, the new therapeutic preoccupation of the me generation would, of course, seep into the church, although in less glaring and more sanitized versions.

Looking back on this time, Wade Clark Roof said that one of the defining marks of the boomer generation was its distinction between the inward and outward aspects of religion. That is, between what is called spirit and institution. The institutional aspect of Christian faith, the church, came to be viewed with skepticism.

Credence was given instead to what is internal, not to church doctrine, which others had formulated, not to church authority indeed, not to any external authority at all. Rather, it's in private intuitions that God is found. Boomers were believers in their own private worlds and disbelievers in what the church does and says.

Here, in fact, were the seeds that by the end of the 1990s had produced throughout the West millions of people who were spiritual but not religious. In both America and Europe, around 80% say they were spiritual, and while this included a number who were also religious, there were many of the spiritual who were decidedly hostile to

all religions. They were opposed to doctrines they were expected to believe, rules they had to follow, and churches they were expected to attend.

They resisted each of these. They would not be encumbered by religious or social expectations that others imposed on them. The impulses that began in the 1960s had become dominant by the 1990s, and of course, TV and the internet fed this disposition.

There are a surprising number who get their spiritual uplift week by week only from the comfort of their own living rooms or from their computers. They never go to church. Well, they go to church but do so in their own way.

When Roof did his analysis, he described this as a generational habit. This, he said, is how boomers are. The truth is, though, that this outlook is not large in a single generation.

Those who followed the boomers, the Gen Xers, and then the millennials had exactly the same habits. This is what Smith's study on teenagers also picked up. No, this is not a generational matter.

It was and is a cultural matter. This is what is happening to people who are living amid a highly modernized society. They're in the midst of the American paradox and they're part and parcel of both its postmodern mood and its solutions.

This was the soil on which Oprah built her TV empire. The followers who watched her show week by week were so conventional as apple pie in their own minds. The Pied Piper whom they followed, though, really is not.

She heralded an age when God is found in the self, when salvation is only about therapy, happiness is just around the corner, and consumption is everyone's right. And the next thing, and the nice thing about Oprah, is that she herself is not perfect on toast. She is so very human.

Her fallacies and shortcomings are all on display in moments of painful honesty. It was as if she was in her own private confessional, though confessing to herself, but the whole world was privileged to listen in. The cultural attitudes that Oprah mined, of course, affected much more than just personal satisfaction or even religion.

In his *Twilight of Authority*, Robert Nisbet wrote about how those attitudes undermined the entire political process. Across the board, he said, given our self-preoccupation, our total self-focus, there's a retreat from what is important to the community to what is important only to the individual. From the weighty to the ephemeral, from others to ourselves.

And our national conversation about these things is as far removed as it could be from the days when people had the nation's good in their minds. Perhaps the epitome of this was the seven multi-hour Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, reported nationally by newsprint when serious issues were seriously debated at great length. Now, our national issues are debated on TV when a nation becomes absorbed in trivia, Neil Postman said in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, when life is reduced to nothing but entertainment and the public discussion of our nature's well-being is carried out in the baby talk of small TV soundbites, then we are getting the first whiffs of cultural death.

No longer is there a way to talk about what is good and no longer is there an appetite to talk about any good other than that of private self-interest. There come those times in a nation's life, as Guinness has written when its people rise up against the founding principles of their own nation. This is one of those times in America.

It is far more dangerous than any terrorist attack. It is, in fact, a free people's suicide, as he puts it in the title of his book. Why? Because what holds a republic together has never been simply the Constitution and our laws.

The law is an exceedingly blunt instrument when it comes to controlling human behavior. There are many things that are unethical that are not illegal. Most lying, for example, is not illegal, but is always unethical.

Our criminal and civil laws can control only so much of our behavior. It is virtue that does the rest, and that is precisely what is being eroded in this self-oriented, self-consumed culture. Here is the acid that is eating away at the nation's foundations, degrading objective values, uprooting older customs, and leaving people with no clear sense of purpose, and indeed, no purpose at all, other than their own self-interest.

Under the post-modern sun, everyone has a right to their own version of reality. When this comes about, any culture loses its ability to renew its own life. The culture of the past is then converted into superficial formulae that float around the air, waves, and our past, person-to-person, on the internet.

It is served up again as kitsch, and everyone pretends this is the same deep old thing it once was. It is not. When this happens, we are in the twilight of American culture, as Morris Berman argues.

Things get blurry. This disposition was articulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Culture*. With all of its French prolixity, its strangeness, it seemed like a misfit in America, as books go.

But we had already advanced down this road ourselves, maybe not with the same French auteur, but nevertheless toward the same conclusions. Writer after writer and movie after movie in the 1990s assumed there was no independent reality, no reality out there. What we have, each one of us, is a private framework of understanding, and there are no facts to lean on.

Facts exist only when we come to understand them within our own private worlds. Thomas Kuhn, who has written about scientific theory-making, was now widely invoked to explain much of what was happening in culture. Everyone began to speak of paradigm shifts as easily as they did of burgers and fries.

So it was that the boundaries between things began to get a bit sketchy, then to disappear. America was ready for this. As James Livingstone remarks, Americans needed no prodding from tenured radicals to go down this road.

There are a number of these fallen boundaries of which we should be aware. The distinction between soul and body was a boundary that disappeared increasingly after the 1960s as our culture began its self-transformation. All that we are, it came to be assumed and then asserted, is animal.

All that we are is just our body. The problem is, though, that in this new world, we struggle to find personal reality. We do not always know how to express our individuality.

We yearn for something that will set us apart from everyone else. A little external decoration, like being pierced and tattooed, helps. Actually, it was not just tattoos.

It was everything that went along with being cool. Everything that made one stand out as a one-of-a-kind body, as different. In that difference, as mysterious, and in that mystery as something that was, well, oh so desirable.

That is what life is about. But if the distinction between ourselves and animals has gone by the wayside, then this opens up a new discussion about rights. That is what happened next.

With earnest countenances, there were those who assured us that animals are no different from humans and should be accorded the same rights. It has even been proposed that animals deserve to have lawyers to help them secure those rights. Though if I may say so, no animal deserves some of our lawyers.

That's nasty. This disappearance of boundaries happened not only in relation to the body but to gender, too. The manipulation of gender and its bending remains on the edges of society, among the other exotica.

But homosexuality is an entirely different matter. Homosexuality has gained significant cultural acceptance, and that acceptance is now right in the mainstream. Indeed, it was right in the center of President Obama's inaugural address in 2013.

That there is widespread support for homosexuality is itself significant. But of far greater significance is the fact that it is only one part of a profound, multi-pronged effort to redefine the family. We're in the midst of a massive social experiment.

We're redefining the most basic building block of any society. The Marxists tried to redesign the class system of their day. That attempt now lies in ruins.

Today, many western societies are attempting an experiment equally bold to rewrite their society's ground rules about families. One suspects though, that the outcome will not be very different. When these social experiments collapse, they bring behind them immense confusion, disorder and suffering.

But this is not the only thing we are seeing. Once we begin to think of ourselves as not other than animals, it no longer seems clear to us that we are actually that different from mere computers. We are just our DNA working itself out through various internal mechanisms.

This was a vain mind in some of our movies like Blade Runner from an earlier time and The Matrix more recently. This is a chicken and egg dilemma here. Which came first? Did we first break down the boundaries and find that the older boundary between ourselves and God had also gone? Or did that boundary go first and once it had disappeared, all of life had to be reimagined? However it happened, the external God has now disappeared and has been replaced by the internal God.

Transcendence has been swallowed up by imminence. God is to be found only within the self. Once that happened, the boundary between right and wrong, at least as we had thought about these things, went down like a row of falling skittles.

Evil and redemption came to be seen as two sides of the same coin. Not the two alternatives in life. The truth is that all of life is being reconceived and reimagined.

However, this attempted rebuilding of ourselves and our society on different foundations is leading us into a dead end. The truth is, we are not doing very well. When God, the external God dies, then the self immediately moves in to fill the vacuum.

But then something strange happens. The self also dies. And with it goes meaning and reality.

When these things go, anything is possible. Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* does not seem so far off into the future after all. We know ourselves now to be on a fast-moving train hurtling down the tracks.

And it is absurd to think that by leaning over the side and digging our heels into the ground we could have the slightest effect on the train's velocity. People sense this. Many do.

There's panic in our culture because we know our era is ending. Our horror movies are not just stories. They're a kind of mirror of ourselves.

They surface. The inchoate sense that we have—the sense of dread.

The sense that all is not right in our world. And that out there is lurking a lurking menace whom we cannot see. We intuitively feel that a terrifying calamity looms over us, but we do not understand what this is or even where it is.

How we are. The American church is on the forefront of encountering this modernized world. How it should manage this engagement though has become its most perplexing dilemma.

And it's also its most urgent challenge. Clearly, it has often been tempted to adapt Christian faith to this context. Rather, they tend to confront the context where that is required.

Instead of becoming an alternative view of life, Christian faith has often become an echo in many ways of what is happening in this kind of modernized culture. Jesus would be surprised to see how easy the kingdom of God has become as we made ourselves relevant to the culture. There are in fact gut-wrenching changes taking place in our western societies.

Great thoughts about God. Our world is being shaken to its very foundations. Instead of offering great thoughts about God, the meaning of reality, and the gospel, there are evangelical churches that are offering only little therapeutic nostrums that are sweet but mostly worthless.

One even wonders whether some current church girls might even be resistant were they to encounter a Christianity that is deep, costly, and demanding. That is why we

must come back to our first principles. And the most basic of these is the fact that God is there and that he is objective to us.

He is not there to conform to us. We must conform to him. He summons us from outside of ourselves to know him.

We do not go inside of ourselves to find him. We are summoned to know him only on his terms. He is not known on our terms.

This summons is heard in and through his word. It is not heard through our intuitions. These are our most basic principles because they deal with our most basic issues and our most basic calling.

The calling is to know God as he has made himself known and in the ways that he has prescribed. We are to hear this call within the framework that he has established. He is not there at our convenience or simply for our healing or simply as the divine teller handing out stuff from his big bank.

No, we are here for his service. We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be. The local church is the place where we should be learning about this and God's word is the means by which we can do so.

But we must go further. It is not enough to know that God has given us truth that corresponds to what is there, that corresponds to him who is there. Additionally, this is the word of God himself that he uses himself to address us personally.

In doing so, he makes us knowers of himself. He comes from outside our circumstances. He is not limited by our subjectivity.

He is free to break in upon us, making us his own and incorporating us into his great redemptive plans, which have been unfolding across the centuries. The Holy Spirit re-speaks scripture's truth to us today and opens our minds and hearts to receive it. Thus, we are given not just a view of God and of ourselves but the view.

And not just a right and true view; we are given God himself, who comes to us through his word by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is God who makes us knowers of himself. God as holy love.

God, then, is objective to us in the sense that we stand before him. We are a cannibal before him and a cannibal within the world of his holiness. We know him savingly only because he has drawn us into a knowledge of himself.

In this is love, John writes, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4.10 We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4.19 The way love is defined and what gives it its body of meaning is the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ.

This is what supremely defines God's love. This will be taken; this is one of our subjects in these lectures this week. John's sentence defining love would have been completed quite differently in the West today.

In this is love, many would say that God is there for us when we need him. He is there for what we need from him. He is love in that he gives us inward comfort and makes us to feel better about ourselves.

He is love in that he makes us happy, that he gives us a sense of fulfillment, that he gives us stuff, that he heals us, that he does everything to encourage us each and every day. That is the prevailing view of God today. When Osteen reiterates all of this, he shows how perfect his cultural touch is.

The Bible's view, by contrast, is quite different because its world is moral. Ours today is deeply, relentlessly, and only therapeutic. The Bible's world is defined by God's character of holiness.

Ours today is not. It is psychological. This is the difference between God, who is objective to us, and God, who is subjective in the sense that he's disappeared into the self.

It's an essential difference for us to grasp as we begin thinking about the doctrine of God. When postmodernists think about life in a psychological framework, they do so from a center in the self. It is the self that determines what salvation means and what life means.

When we think about life within the moral framework of Scripture God gives us, then we're thinking of it with God as its center. It is he in his holiness who defines the salvation we need, and he in his love who provides what we need in Christ. In a postmodern view, we are at life's center.

In the biblical view, we are not. It is God who is life's center. If we do not understand these differences, we will be at sea when we start to think about how God has actually revealed himself.

The interplay between love and holiness is very hard to hold together simultaneously. In fact, many think it's improper to do so. In the West, we greatly approve of the thought that God is love but reject the thought of his holiness.

This, some say, is part of the primitive past from which we have evolved. We've come of age and can no longer believe in harsh myths like divine judgment. By contrast, there are other cultures, especially where radicalized Islam is present, that despise the thought that God is love and think of him only as holy.

Love is seen as part of soft, Western sentimentality. This means that their societies have only harsh laws coupled with all the mechanisms of revenge and retaliations for wrongs done. There's no forgiveness.

Christianity, though, uniquely combines love and holiness because, in God's character, they are and always have been combined. We are thinking here of God's love and holiness as comprising the many aspects of his character that scripture speaks of. The term holy love is not entirely satisfactory.

It may even suggest what we are arguing against, that love is basic and holiness is secondary. But that's not what we mean. The problem is, if I cannot use the shorthand of holy love, we're stuck with other very difficult expressions.

God's holiness and God's love in their union with each other, for example. So, we're going to stick with holy love. Today, our constant temptation, aided and abetted by as it is by our culture, is to shatter the hyphen.

We want God's love without his holiness. We want this because we live in our own private therapeutic worlds that have no absolute moral norms. God's holiness, therefore, becomes a jarring and unwanted intrusion.

His love without his holiness, however, is one of those things in life we simply cannot have. And indeed, it will become one of our greatest joys to be able to understand how God is both holy and loving. Enough.

Enough. This cultural, somewhat depressing introduction lays a framework for our seeking God in his word and learning indeed that he is holy love and even much, much more.

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Theology Proper or God. This is session 1, Cultural Context.