

There is of course a biblical phrasing for this phenomenon—the “itching ears.” A multitude of ministers, teachers, and sundry religious figures are ever eager to scratch them. Though some would read Professor Wolfe’s indictment and my affirmation as surely not applying to them, it likely would—the only differences would be in the doctrinal slant. Each perceives its position and message as the true and correct one, but most are, in some significant way, at variance with the actual life and teachings of Christ.

Christ’s example and his message are so challenging that some professing Christians in every generation have sought doctrinally “acceptable” ways to ameliorate the impact on their lives. But perhaps nowhere and in no time has that dilution been more ubiquitous and creative than in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century church in America. Each denomination, each group, each sect, tends to focus on the sins it has deemed offenses worthy of rebuke, while carefully overlooking others for which they themselves may be culpable. That many of these offenses are often sins of omission makes them no less sinful—just easier to ignore.

Lakewood Church. Another illustration of pandering to the “itching ears” with the health, wealth, happiness, and prosperity gospel, this church’s popularity, in the words of Professor Wolfe “is due as much to its...determination to find out exactly what believers want and to offer it to them—as it is to certainties of the faith. The biggest challenge posed to American society by the popularity of megachurches and other forms of growth-oriented Protestantism is not bigotry but bathos. Television, publishing, political campaigning, education, self-help advice—all increasingly tell Americans what they already want to hear. Religion, it would seem, should now be added to that list.”



Lakewood Church in Texas

To be sure, some ministers and religious leaders do, from time to time, say that which their charges—and certainly the broader culture—would not want to hear. But those forays into the dangerous ground of courage and commitment—and true leadership—are, by comparison, few and limited. Modern American preaching, Protestant and Catholic—with some notable and worthy exceptions—is significant by and large for what is not said, rather than what is said.

The certainty of this failure—and the moral responsibility that goes with it—is so great that, were John the Baptist alive today—the man whom Jesus declared “the greatest man ever born” (Luke 7:28)—he would undoubtedly be treated as leprous and ostracized by most Western religious leaders and most churches, Catholic and Protestant. His message of self-sacrifice and complete rejection of the culture’s values would be regarded as radical and untenable. That he was ostracized by the religious leaders of his day should be a jarring juxtaposition for the modern Western church. John would not countenance any degree of what Professor Wolfe refers to as Americans “practicing their faith in ways so personal and individualistic that their practices blend seamlessly into the culture around them.”⁹