Performing Spiritual Triage

Guest: Dr. Al Mohler
From the series: The Disappearance of God
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Bob: Christmas is a time when we celebrate not just the birth of Christ, but the virgin birth of Christ. That distinction is critical – here’s Dr. Al Mohler.

Al: Doctrinally, there are life or death issues and those issues have to do with such things as the full deity and humanity of Christ- justification by faith alone, the bodily resurrection of Christ – those things are absolutely required for one to be a Christian. With these first order issues we have to get those down.

It’s like on the battlefield where you’re looking at the wounded – you have to take the biggest issues. Let me tell you regrettably there are those who would claim the name of Christian, they would serve in churches with pipe organs, and tall steeples, and pulpits and they will deny the full deity of Christ.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, December 21st. Our host is the President of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey and I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll talk with Dr. Al Mohler today about what we ought to do when believers no longer know what they really believe anymore.

Welcome to FamilyLife Today thanks for joining us. You know for many years there’s been a kind of a small minority of folks in our culture who have identified themselves as atheists – who have stood up and said, “I don’t believe there’s a God.”

In fact I remember when I worked in local radio, and had a call in talk show I invited the local atheist woman to be on our call-in talk show and to talk about why she didn’t believe there was a God. There aren’t a whole lot of folks who will raise their hand and say, “That’s my particular world view.” Although it does seem to be increasing and there have been a lot of books written recently to bolster the idea that we can get rid of God – not only can we, but we ought to get rid of God.

Dennis: As a culture I think we’re looking at it happen even right now. Unfortunately – can I say this? Even within the community of faith it’s like is God disappearing there within the Christian community that we’re not seeing Him for who He really is? Let’s ask our guest on today’s program Dr. Al Mohler what he thinks about that - what do you think Al? Is the Christian community losing God in the midst of the battle?
Al: Well, the issue here is that God is receding from the horizon of our reality, and in too many churches. It’s obvious in our worship, in our preaching, in the way we raise our children, in the way we engage issues - yes! Now, that’s not true everywhere thankfully. God as always leaves a witness, and there’s some wonderful evangelical vibrant churches filled with conviction, but when we look to the culture first we see that God is simply largely escaped from the horizon. He’s just not there – He’s been pushed out of view so that people today are not God haunted in any sense. They don’t feel like God is watching their every move, they don’t feel accountable to God. Unfortunately even in some churches it’s still that way.

Dennis: You have given yourself as a leader to the next generation of those who are going to guide the church – pastor the church as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

Bob: No, you’re supposed to say that, “The” Southern Baptist Theological Seminary!

Dennis: He didn’t correct me on that earlier when I did that. He’s also the author of a number of books including a new one called: The Disappearance of God – Dangerous Beliefs in the New Spiritual Openness. Was it this loss that we’re talking about here that led you to write this book to exhort the Christian community as Jude did in Jude verse 3 – contend for the faith, hang in there for the faith?

Al: Absolutely, and this new spiritual openness - the subtitle of the book is the problem – is that we’re a society in the name of openness has basically given away its mind. You know we are unable to think clearly. When God disappears from the horizon we have no standard of meaning, of being, of value, of beauty or of anything else. The next thing you know we just give ourselves to confusion. If that doesn’t characterize our culture I don’t know what does.

Bob: Well, this is a – and we’ve hear it so often – it’s a pluralistic culture when it comes to religion. In fact I remember the sociologist Robert Bellah who years ago came to the conclusion—he said, “What we have in America is the logical possibility of 250 million different religions because everybody’s religion is just their religion.” How do we have a common sense of what is real spiritually when we have hundreds of denominations and thousands of non-denominations that are splintering in all different directions?

Al: Well, it’s literally impossible you know what you described. So there has to be some means of rescue. The only rescue is that there’s one God who speaks to us in His word, and defines reality for us. You know liberal Christianity rejects that, obviously a secularized world rejects that, many people are confused about that but where you find believing Christians you’d better find the people who know that God has spoken, and now there are things we know, and there are things we are accountable for.
**Bob:** So, we go to the same Bible to look for that standard that is our common standard but even among those who go to the same Bible we come away with different conclusions.

**Dennis:** Yes, Al that confuses some of our listeners that they see major Christian leaders who really differ around basic beliefs. What are they to do in that situation?

**Al:** Well, that's a great tragedy, and as a matter of fact that's what the New Testament warns against. You know the book of James says, “That those who would teach would bear a stricter judgment.” I'll tell you Dennis I fear the judgment that will fall upon many who would speak on behalf of God who liberate themselves from God's word. Who say something contrary to what's found in God's word, or who play games with God's word.

You know *Newsweek* magazine in an earlier month this year published an article on the religious case for gay marriage. In order to get there they had to turn the New Testament upside down – they had to make Paul say the opposite of what we know he was saying, and what the church has always known he was saying. You know people are going to play around with the truth that way. Well, we just have to hope and pray that people will see through that.

**Bob:** Okay, so what do we do if we have these friends who live down the street, and they go to 1st Baptist Church and then we have these other friends who live down the street and they're over at 1st Methodist Church.

**Dennis:** Well now Bob you're using a poor illustration here because he's a Baptist.

(laughter)

**Bob:** Well, I know he’s going to send them all over to 1st Baptist – right that's what you’re going to do?

**Al:** Well, if 1st Baptist is liberal I’m going to send them to 1st Methodist if it’s Evangelical. So, the bottom line is that we have a new sense of the centrality of the gospel, and I’m a real Baptist. I'm a Baptist by conviction, but I am first of all a Christian, and I believe the main issue is: knowing the gospel of Christ, honoring, teaching, and telling the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the only message that saves.

You know J. Gresham Machen – very famous Christian theologian, great apologist, and defender of the faith in the early 20th century we’re talking about almost a century ago said, “That the difference between Christianity and liberalism is the difference between two different religions.” So, even then as now there are churches, and people that would claim the same denominator: Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, you know - Lutheran but they don’t believe the same things.

**Bob:** You’re saying you have more in common with some of your Methodist friends than with some of your Baptist friends.
Al: Well, with some people who claim to be Baptists – sure. Now, I’m thankful that for instance in the denomination I serve – in the Southern Baptist Convention there’s been a huge resurgence in theological correction without which most of us that love the gospel would have to be out of it. I’m so thankful that has taken place. I would simply say to people the names do mean something but it’s the preaching that’s determinative. Find out what the church teaches, find out what it preaches, find out what it says the gospel is, and then you’ll find out if it’s a church.

Dennis: Well, I want to go down to the basic level, which is where laymen and women live where they flesh out their Christian worldview. I read recently that it’s now less than 9% of all professing Christians have really what is known as a Christian worldview. Somehow we seem to be failing in equipping those who are in the pews to be able to look at life, and filter it through this book here – the Bible, and come up with solutions.

You actually use a medical term coupled with the word theological, and you coined theological triage – that there’s a need to perform this on the body of Christ?

Al: Absolutely. The word emerged in the French it goes back to as I understand it to the emergency fields of World War I where people had to go in and decide – okay here’s someone with a gunshot wound, here’s someone with a twisted ankle, here’s someone with a spider bite – who gets the first treatment?

You know we’re out here – we’re in a war situation we have to decide who’s going to get the medical treatment. So, you had to decide what’s most serious. Now, let me tell you the first order of theological issues – you have a first order injury that’s a gunshot wound to the chest – we know that’s life or death – okay?

Doctrinally there are life or death issues, and those issues have to do with such things as the full deity and humanity of Christ, justification by faith alone, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the nature of God is three in one, and one in three: The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Those things are absolutely required for one to be a Christian. You can’t be a Christian without understanding that Christ died for our sins as the incarnate Son of God, and was raised by the power of God on the third day. That’s just the quintessential New Testament definition.

So, with these first order issues we have to get those down. It’s like on the battlefield where you’re looking at the wounded. You have to take the biggest issues! Let me tell you regrettably there are those who would claim the name of Christian, they would serve in churches with pipe organs, and tall steeples, and pulpits, and they will deny the full deity of Christ.

Bob: I’m smiling over here because you just identified yourself, and you just said, “The first order issues are for everybody to be a fundamentalist.” That’s a word we don’t like using in our culture today.
Al: Well, everyone believes there’s some fundamentals – even liberals believe there’s some fundamentals – they just believe in liberal fundamentals so they become liberal fundamentalists. The reality is that the New Testament says this. The apostle Paul says, “I delivered unto you which I first received as a first priority that Christ died for our sins according to the gospel, and that He was raised on the third day by the power of God.”

You know that is the gospel he makes very clear. The New Testament has some very clear statements about the irreducible minimum of the Christian faith. There are some concise doctrinal summaries you can find, and the reality is you take any of those things away you don’t have the gospel. So, that’s a first order issue. A second order issue is still important.

Dennis: Before you move to the second order issue I just want to make sure parents hear this because we had a guest who teaches at your seminary – Dr. Bruce Ware who just finished writing a book: Big Truths for Young Hearts and it’s all about passing on some of the great theological teachings of scripture.

Al: It’s a great book!

Dennis: It is a great book, and I’m going to suggest that parents who are catching the picture of what we’re talking about here not only get a copy of your book to understand where the battle is, but also get a copy of Dr. Ware’s book so that they can practically begin to teach the next generation. Here’s my concern Al, I think we have a generation of young families that are growing up in this emerging culture that we have here who do not have core convictions. They don’t know what they believe. They’re soft in the core not just around the edges, and they’re not going to get a solid core without some disciplined study, and some reading of some great Christian literature.

Al: You know let me tell you where we are as a generation. You know I used to say that what we see now in the church is a generation of young people who cannot connect the dots. They don’t see the big picture. The Christian worldview because they see the dots but they don’t connect the dots. Well, now I have to tell you we’ve gotten into an even more desperate situation where an awful lot of our kids and young people don’t even have the dots. They don’t even have the doctrine, they don’t even have the truths, and they’ve never heard these things.

You know let’s just take the issue of the doctrine of Revelation- of God speaking in the Bible - now you realize that makes all the difference in the world. You know it makes the difference between knowing something, and knowing nothing. It makes the difference between hearing from God and hearing only silence from the heavens. You know if God has spoken then that makes all the difference in the world! How many of our own church members understand that God has spoken and now we have to deal with what He said?

Dennis: And that scripture is God breathed!
Al: And is inerrant, and infallible because if it isn’t we can’t trust it.

Dennis: If we haven’t heard from Him what are we going to believe?

Al: If we haven’t heard from Him, and we have silence from the heavens then we are lost.

Bob: So, that’s an example of what you’d call a first order – a triage circle one issue. What’s out there in circle two?

Al: Well, in circle two we have those issues where when we disagree we can still recognize each other as authentic followers of Christ but these are really big issues that will prevent us doing ministry together. Then, that’s a hard thing to say but it’s true.

For instance you know we still have among evangelicals who agree on all those first order issues – we still have Lutheran, and Presbyterian, and Baptist churches because the second order issue would be something like baptism. How are we going to understand that?

Now, I’m really a Baptist, and I believe it’s really important to understand believer’s baptism by immersion. I mean what is really tied to our understanding of the church is the regenerate body of believers. But, I still recognize my dear Presbyterian Evangelical friends as authentic believers in Christ, I’m thankful for their witness to the gospel. I’m thankful for every single sinner that comes to faith in Christ through those churches, I’m thankful for every child that is raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord in those families.

Dennis: Will you join them in ministry then?

Al: I’ll join them in bearing witness to the gospel. That’s what we’re doing together for the gospel. I mean we’re very clear. Here’s the gospel we’re going to stand together in it, we’re going to encourage each other in it, we’re going to rejoice and celebrate the gospel together but we’re not going to do baptism together.

Yet, I recognize my dear friend Ligon Duncan that the 1st Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi - one of my colleagues, and defenders for the gospel – I recognize him as one of my dearest Christian brothers: What a stalwart defender of the faith - “The faith” – not Baptist, Presbyterian – the faith of Christ – the Christian faith.

But, you know there are third order issues that really aren’t there even on that level of importance. This is where we couldn’t be married if we had to make every third order issue a first order issue.

If on the battlefield we had to treat every spider bite as if it was a chest wound we’d have people dieing all around us. The reality is that for instance there’s some millennial
questions: When exactly does Christ come, in what order do these things come? Those aren’t un-important – all truth is God’s truth – all God’s truth is for our good.

**Bob:** How Jesus might return you say is a third issue?

**Al:** Not that He returns gloriously, historically, bodily, physically but the timing issues. Of course some of those issues – the churches never had unanimity on this.

**Bob:** That’s the point I wanted to make. The fact that Jesus is coming back that’s first order issue?

**Al:** You bet! Otherwise there’s no end to the story, there’s no judgment, there’s no victory, there’s no salvation.

**Bob:** Right!

**Dennis:** But, the point is as fellow followers of Christ we have a big God. We’re all under grace, and we ought to dispense a little of that grace to one another and get along with one another rather than splitting theological hairs around the third core issue right?

**Al:** Oh, absolutely! You know in recent weeks I've had the opportunity to address Anglican gatherings, and Presbyterian gatherings.

**Dennis:** Now, be careful. Keith – he’s our engineer, and he is Anglican so he may turn off your microphone if you don’t say – he might split some theological hairs.

**Al:** Well, that’s all right. The Anglican’s lately have been inviting me to microphones, and I've been writing about my appreciation for some very brave Anglicans fighting the cause of the gospel. I mean you given the issues right now – right now there are Anglican archbishops in Africa who are just so stalwart for the gospel they’re embarrassing us all by their bravery and courage. They're paying a price to defend the gospel of Christ, and in that spirit we better all be Anglican, and in praying for God to bless that ministry and to bless that witness.

**Dennis:** I don’t want to move to one that you're wrong about because this next one I’m going to toss your way I happen to believe you are absolutely right about. But, if Bill Bright were here – in fact one of the hallmarks’s of his ministry as the President and Founder of Campus Crusade for Christ was he constantly taught about assurance of salvation.

He believed that a number of people in the church did not know where they would go if they died. They were not assured of where they would spend eternity, and they didn’t have around these core beliefs we’re talking about the very fundamental belief that once one places his or her faith in Jesus Christ, and makes them Lord and Master of their
lives that they’ve been grabbed by the Father’s hand, and no one is able to remove them from the Father’s hand.

You believe assurance of salvation is one of those core convictions. Talk to the person who doesn’t have assurance of salvation right now who’s listened to our broadcast, and thinks: I don’t know – I don’t know where I’d go if I died right now.

Al: Well, maybe the person listening who doesn’t have assurance of salvation isn’t saved. I’m saying the first thing is make your calling and election sure: Go back to the gospel of Christ. Do you believe it? Do you believe that Christ is the very son of God who died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin, and that He was raised by the power of God on the third day – the vindication of His sacrifice such that when you come to Him by faith you are forgiven your sins, and you were received into the life everlasting, you were united with Christ?

If you believe those things then you’re a Christian. If you don’t believe those things you shouldn’t have assurance of salvation – you’re not saved! If you do believe those things then who are you doubting? See here’s the big issue – see pastorally I would want to say the big issue here is if you know those things to be true then where’s your lack of assurance of salvation – is it because you don’t believe that at every moment you can by will hold tenaciously to them as you believe you must hold tenaciously to them?

Well, just remember you’re saved by grace, and you’re kept by grace, too. So, let me just say that one of the problems with getting saved so to speak with coming to faith in Christ is that we have to relinquish our ability to save ourselves.

Dennis: It does not depend upon us!

Al: You do not have the ability to keep yourself. You know the New Testament tells us that we are kept by the power of God. The God you trust to be faithful to His promises is the God whom the apostle Paul said you can trust to be faithful to the end. So, let me just say this: If you’re struggling with assurance of salvation then go back and wonder do I really believe the gospel, have I really trusted Christ? Well, if you have then if you fail to have the assurance of the gospel, you’re doubting that God is faithful to His promises.

You know one of the most precious things I find in the New Testament, and I’ve been preaching through verse by verse the gospel of Matthew. Matthew focuses on a child in such an interesting way and we’re told that the child is the model of faith – the faith that saves, and what is a child’s faith?

A child trusts the parent to do what the parent says, the child trusts the parent to be faithful to his promises. When the child knows he’s a child he lifts up his hand to be grabbed by another, and that’s exactly I think the picture of saving faith. We can’t keep ourselves. We certainly can’t save ourselves. We put our hand up, and we are kept by the power of God.
Dennis: We can know if we died right now where we would spend eternity on the basis
of what Christ finished on the cross, and the empty tomb.

Al: You know that’s such a good point because here’s where evangelicals often betray
a misunderstanding of the gospel. We come up and say to someone: Why do you
know you’re a Christian, and they say, “Because I trusted Christ.” That’s the wrong
place to start. You started it exactly right. We know we’re saved because God saves
sinners through Christ, and He saved even me.

You know our hymns get it better than usually sometimes when we give the answer.
Because someone writing a hymn really has to think it through. You take Charles
Wesley’s hymns, or the kind of hymns we sing – you know we were saved gloriously
saved by the fact that God saves sinners, and He saved even me.

Dennis: I’m going to call an audible right here because Bill Bright wrote a little book
called: A Transferable Concept – How to be Sure You’re a Christian and it’s just
walking through the very fundamentals of what you just talked about Dr. Mohler.

Anybody who calls who wants a copy of this little book we’ll make it available to them at
no cost. So, those of you who give financially to our ministry you make it possible for us
to be able to give a book like this to people to make sure they know where they’re going
when they take their last breath.

Al: Well, that’s such a sweet thing. You know in John’s letters he says in a very
important place, “These things are written that you might know.” That’s the real gift –
knowing!

Bob: I think about the fact that we’re told in scripture that we’re supposed to be ready
to give an answer for the hope that lies within us. I wonder just how many of our
churchgoers today are prepared to do that. Not just to give an answer but to give a
biblical answer for the hope that is within them. That’s the thing I appreciate about the
book that you’ve written: The Disappearance of God. On one hand it’s a solid,
apologetic for the reality of the existence of God but it also helps reorient and make
more biblical our thinking about God, and the gospel, and why we have this hope that is
within us.

I hope a lot of our listeners will go to our website today at FamilyLifeToday.com and get
a copy of the book. It’s called: The Disappearance of God – Dangerous Beliefs in the
New Spiritual Openness by Dr. Al Mohler. We have it again in our FamilyLife Today
Resource Center.

You can go on-line at FamilyLifeToday.com to get more information about how you can
receive a copy of the book – again it’s FamilyLifeToday.com or you can call 1-800-
FLTODAY – 1-800-358-6329. We have folks here who can answer any questions you
have about Dr. Mohler’s book, or can make arrangements to have a copy of it sent to you.

Now, I have to tell you about what’s been going on around here because it’s really been – it’s been kind of crazy, exciting, and crazy. I don’t know the right word to use for it. Most of our listeners know that we have been mentioning over the last several weeks that we have a matching gift that has been made available to us during the month of December. Some friends of the ministry who came along and said, “We want to match every donation you receive dollar for dollar up to a certain total number.”

This is the largest matching gift that we have ever been offered. Well, let me tell you what’s happened – we’ve had some other folks who have come and said, “We’d like to boost that matching gift number up a little bit.”

In other words, we want to see even more FamilyLife Today listeners join with you and see if we can incentivize that so what had been a $1,250,000 matching gift has just increased in recent days to a new total. Our matching gift amount now is $1,525,000.

We are thankful, we’re grateful for these friends who have come and said, “We want to turn up the heat on FamilyLife Today listeners.” At the same time we’re hoping you folks will call or go on-line today so that we can take full advantage of this new matching gift amount. Who knows we may have even more than this come in over the next couple of days – we’ll see! But, again we appreciate those of you who have already given – if you’re able to help with a donation before the end of the year we would love to hear from you.

You can make your donation online at FamilyLifeToday.com or you can call 1-800-FLTODAY and make a donation over the phone. Keep in mind your donations are being matched dollar for dollar up to this new total of $1,525,000. Let me just say, “Thanks in advance for whatever you’re able to do in making a year-end contribution to FamilyLife Today – we very much appreciate your financial support of this ministry.”

We want to encourage you to be back with us tomorrow. Al Mohler’s going to be here again. We’re going to talk about what I think is one of the more unusual arguments for the existence or the reality of God that actually you talk about in your book. I think our listeners are going to appreciate the conversation tomorrow. I hope you can be back with us.

I want to thank our engineer today Keith Lynch and our entire broadcast production team on behalf of our host Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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