

In February 2017, an article titled “Learning from Self-Help Guru Tony Robbins,” by Mike Cosper appeared on the TGC website’s front page. Phil Johnson expressed a concern to Joe Carter, TGC’s content editor, about the Coalition’s drift away from gospel-centered topics. Johnson suggested that an inordinate amount of TGC’s bandwidth was devoted to “treating popular movies, rap music, and other kitschy expressions of postmodern superficiality as serious ‘art’ worthy of evangelical attention.”

Carter defended the Robbins article and TGC’s pattern of commenting on pop culture. He said he was tired of hearing complaints from people who couldn’t articulate why they think TGC should not write about about current events. The following dialogue ensued:

Johnson: Covering “current events” is one thing. Being preoccupied with carnal trivialities is another. **Current events** does not mean “whatever is trending on ‘Entertainment Tonight.’” And essays desperately seeking spiritual value in Tony Robbins’s sideshow or Hollywood’s Oscar bacchanal are not “journalism.”

It’s hard to miss the fact that entertainment-related trumpery at TGC outweighs the kind of writing where serious gospel issues are dealt with in a careful, biblical, and doctrinally-sound fashion. I’m not surprised that you “hear this complaint every week.” It might be time to stop angrily pushing back, and ask yourself if maybe the critics might be making a legitimate point.

Carter: Can you provide an example of TGC covering something that was “trending on ‘Entertainment Tonight.’”?

Johnson: Besides “Meeting Marty Scorsese” and the other articles you published about the film “Silence”? Your post about the Oscars would also surely qualify.

Consider this: The very same day TGC was extolling Hollywood’s commitment to “excellence,” Michael Gungor was attacking the atonement. Since I’m pretty sure his constituency overlaps the demographic you write for, I would have loved to see you respond to his remarks with an energy equal to what you put into the film reviews. But . . . crickets.

Carter: Okay, so we wrote about the Oscars. We’re not a fundamentalist site that encourages people to watch only VeggieTales. The Oscars are a national cultural phenomena about a significant artistic medium. I’m not sure why we would want to avoid talking about that on a site that covers “Arts & Culture.”

I didn’t even know who Gungor was—I had to look him up—so I doubt there is much of an overlap.

Okay, so there are three articles that you didn’t like (TGC publishes about 18-25 a week). If you think that we shouldn’t ever write about pop culture I can respect that view, even if I disagree. But I still find your comment to that “entertainment-related trumpery at TGC outweighs the kind of writing where serious gospel issues are dealt with” to be sign that either you’re exaggerating or that you don’t read our site often enough.

Johnson: What I gave you were very recent, representative answers, not an exhaustive list. Do you WANT an exhaustive list? I'm betting most of your readers are smart enough to see the point already.

However, here's another way to see the point. Try this with the TGC website's built-in search engine: Search for the phrase "justification by faith" and notice the date of the most recent article that comes up on the front page (2015). Or search for "atonement" (May 2016). Now do the same search again with "film."

See what I mean?

And seriously, with all that stress on engaging pop culture, you had to Google Gungor?

Carter: "Justification by faith" and "atonement" are specific terms of theology and not broad categories. If you said we wrote about "film" more often than we did "theology" then your criticism would be warranted.

Also, is there a specific reason we should be writing about "justification by faith" and "atonement"? I would say that 90 percent or more of our regular readers do not find those concepts controversial. While it is always helpful to write about such topics (say, once a year?) there doesn't seem to be a need to tackle them frequently.

Johnson: Thanks for your persistence. I do appreciate the fact that you have replied repeatedly, and not just blown me off.

We clearly have differing views about what qualifies as *serious* biblical and theological content, and that's why you think my remarks are exaggerated.

I fear we also have differing views about what constitutes *gospel* content. You're clearly not the least bit troubled by the sparse coverage you give to topics like justification, atonement and the remission of sins. You wave those themes aside as theological technicalities--non-controversial (you believe) and therefore unimportant to your mission.

That's my whole objection. I still say if those topics don't come up more frequently than once every six months or so, you're not really focused on gospel issues.

I HAVE commented positively when TGC has published articles criticizing the prosperity gospel. But again, you aren't devoting the kind of bandwidth to that issue that you give to "Arts and Entertainment."

PS: My point about Gungor was not that you ought to know him or his music, but that his remarks about the atonement received TONS of publicity among the very demographic you write for, and you evidently didn't think *what he said about the gospel* warranted any response from **The GOSPEL Coalition**—on the very same day you were pushing an article about how evangelicals need to be paying more attention to the Oscars. To me it's a mind-boggling incongruity. I'm sorry you don't get it.

I won't comment again. You can have the last word.