

*THE COURAGE TO BE PROTESTANT:
TRUTH-LOVERS, MARKETERS, AND EMERGENTS IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD*

By Michael Gleghorn

In the *preface* to this volume David Wells tells us that the book began “as a simple summary of the four volumes that had preceded it” (xiii). Over time, however, he began reworking the content in order to get “at the essence of the project” that has occupied him over the last fifteen years (xiii). In his previous four books, he was primarily concerned with “five main doctrinal themes: truth, God, self, Christ, and the church” (xiii). The present work will revisit each of these.

Chapter 1: The Lay of the Evangelical Land

According to Wells, it takes courage “to live by the truths of historic Protestantism” in today’s social and cultural context (1). This partly explains why contemporary evangelicalism is fracturing “into three rather distinct constituencies” (2). Wells refers to these three groups as classical evangelicals, marketers, and emergents (4).

Classical evangelicalism, known for its “doctrinal seriousness,” took shape after World War II (4). The movement was structured “around two core theological beliefs”: the inspiration and authority of the Bible and the “centrality of Christ’s penal substitution” (5). But according to Wells, the movement also suffered from two major weaknesses. First, by focusing on these two core beliefs, classical evangelicals were willing to tolerate a great deal of diversity on other, supposedly less essential, doctrines (7). This was problematic because, over time, it tended to make people indifferent “toward much of the fabric of belief that makes up Christian

faith” (8). And this helped birth the second major weakness, the gradual vanishing of the church (10). Wells attributes much of this problem to the rise of parachurch ministries. While he believes such ministries have performed a number of beneficial functions, he fears that many evangelicals have transferred their loyalty from the church to various parachurch ministries (10-11). These two weaknesses, Wells believes, have contributed to the rise of the marketers and emergents (12).

Marketers are those who have modeled themselves after Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Community Church (13). While striving to be faithful to evangelical doctrine, they utilize the latest “marketing techniques” to reach potential customers with the Christian message (13). In Wells’ view, these churches are often focused on entertaining their audience so that they’ll keep coming back for more (14). Emergents, on the other hand, are described as “doctrinal minimalists” (17). Wells believes they share much in common with “the older Protestant liberalism” (17). If classical evangelicalism is to survive, says Wells, we need men and women who will not capitulate to the marketers or emergents, but who will have “the courage to be faithful to what Christianity in its biblical forms has always stood for across the ages” (21).

Chapter 2: Christianity for Sale

In today’s world, there are many voices telling us that the church must change if it wants to remain relevant and attractive to potential customers (25). According to Wells, however, the kind of changes being urged are such that, if embraced, would make the church bland and tasteless (28). The “conventional wisdom” of our day tells us that today’s customers want to be entertained and uplifted (28-30). They don’t want to hear about doctrine, or sing boring hymns, or be confronted with divine commandments (39). To do such things is counterproductive and even risks losing one’s customer base (37).

Of course, Wells recognizes that some pastors and churches have embraced such marketing techniques for good reasons (e.g. to see people come to Christ or to engage the postmodern culture) (41-2). Nevertheless, he thinks that such marketing strategies are seriously

flawed. For example, he argues that the failure to preach Christian doctrine with an appropriate level of seriousness and conviction is at least partly responsible for the rather bizarre situation in which 45% of Americans claim to be born again, while only 7-9% “give any evidence of Christian seriousness by way of minimal biblical knowledge for making life’s decisions” (45). What is especially ironic about this sad state of affairs is that most of the *formerly unchurched*, who had recently begun attending a church, indicated that good, solid preaching of Bible doctrine was important to them. Ninety-one percent of these people indicated a genuine desire “to know what the church believed” (55). Far from being marginal, or unimportant, the desire to learn Christian doctrine is what drew most of these people to church! In light of such statistics, Wells advises us “to close the door on this disastrous experiment in retailing faith” and “to reach back into the Word of God” that we may find, once again, “a serious faith for our undoubtedly serious times” (58).

Chapter 3: Truth

Ours is a day in which the very possibility of knowing truth is considered highly suspect by many people, both inside and outside the church (59-60). Wells attributes this lack of confidence to our society’s failure to ground such notions in the objectivity of God (61). “There is nothing outside the individual that stands over against the individual, that remains as the measure for the individual’s actions, the standard for what is right and wrong, or as the test of what is true and what is not” (61). American individualism has led to the “enthronement of the self,” a state of affairs in which we have been emancipated “from all authorities external to ourselves” and set free to live life on our own terms and according to our own rules (69-70). We no longer readily think that there might be such a thing as objective truth, truth which exists independently of whether we believe in it or not (70).

According to Wells, the classic definition of truth as correspondence emerged in the Middle Ages. In this definition, truth is understood as “the correspondence between an object and our knowledge of it” (72). By assuming the objectivity of a real, external world, and the

possibility that this world can be accurately known and understood, the objectivity of truth follows naturally (73). And this, argues Wells, is entirely consistent with the Christian view of truth. Given that God has revealed himself in the Bible, “we can know his character and intentions in a way that corresponds to what is there” (74). He grants that the biblical writers were fallible human beings, but he insists that “the Spirit’s work in inspiration means that he has secured through their writing, despite their human fallibility, a correspondence between what they wrote and what was there” (74). The result is a true, and trustworthy, divine revelation (75). And indeed, as one reads the Bible, one finds repeated assertions that its words are words of truth, given by the God of truth who does not lie (76).

But if this is so, then why are so many emergents hesitant to claim that they can know the truth? Because, says Wells, they have been taken captive by the postmodern view that the connections between a “truth statement and what that statement refers to have been broken”—or at least obscured (77). In one way or another, Wells sees evidence for this capitulation to the spirit of postmodernism not only in the writings of someone like Brian McLaren, but also in the more sophisticated, scholarly work of N.T. Wright (85-7). While he sees the “desire of marketers and emergents to engage the culture” as commendable, he is quick to remind us that there is an important difference between engaging the culture and capitulating to it (92). In his view there is a better way to move forward. But in order to do so the church must resolutely keep two points in mind: “first, that Christianity is about truth, and second, that those who say they are Christians must model this truth by their integrity” (92).

Chapter 4: God

For many people today, life has lost its center. But why? According to Wells, this question has both a biblical and a cultural answer (99). Biblically speaking, the answer is rather straightforward. People today have the *sense* that they have lost their center because of human sinfulness (99). Of course, Wells assures us that, in reality, “the center has not been lost.” But what “has been lost is our ability to see it, to recognize it, to bow before it, to reorder our lives

. . . in the presence of this . . . triune, holy-loving God of the Bible” (99). Instead of properly centering our lives on God, we improperly center them on ourselves (100). And this, of course, is the essence of sin. “Sin,” writes Wells, “is not only the absence of good. It also entails our active opposition to God. It is . . . the defiance of his authority, the rejection of his truth, the challenge to his sovereignty in which we set ourselves up in life to live the way we want to live” (102). This is why contemporary men and women feel like they have lost their center. They have replaced God, their true center, with themselves (104).

The cultural answer to this question differs from one time and place to another. In our time and place, Wells suggests, “it is the question of meaning – or, more precisely, meaninglessness – that haunts us the most” (105). Charles Darwin had at least something to do with this, for his concept of natural selection came “to be seen as the alternative to God’s providence” (105). But it would be unfair to lay all the blame on Darwin. Many 19th century writers began “to think more in terms of a void at the center of life,” while the notion of divine providence faded increasingly into the background (106). Life seemed to be little more than a meaningless series of unpredictable accidents, with “neither rhyme nor reason to it” (106). This was accelerated in the 1960s with “a turn inward to the self” (107). According to Wells, “It is the self and its intuitions from which we derive the only meaning we have in life. This means that the transcendent from which we once took our bearings has been relocated within. The self must function as our transcendent norm. It is from within that we are left to read our own meaning” (107). Unfortunately (or, fortunately, as the case may be) the self is not capable of bearing this weight. It simply does not possess the resources to provide us with the meaning we so desperately want and need. When placed in the position of playing a role that it was never intended to play, the self becomes “empty and fragile” and begins “to disintegrate” (112).

The only way to be re-centered is to repent, to turn from our self back to God and receive the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection through faith in the gospel. Only then, in the light of this new knowledge, can we begin to rethink the meaning of our lives (116). A crucially important part of this endeavor is the Bible. Left to ourselves, Wells contends, we tend

to focus on the “inside God” and forget all about the “outside God” (120). The “inside God” is the God who is “near to us and related to us through creation and his preservation of it” (122). This is an important part of who God is, but it is only a part. When taken in isolation, these truths can “become perverted and misused and, in the absence of the balancing truths about God’s otherness, quite damaging” (123). In order to have an adequate concept of God, therefore, we need to balance the notion of the “inside God” with that of the “outside God”. The “outside God” is described in the Bible “as being exalted . . . ‘high’ and ‘above’ all of life” (124). In theological terms, he is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (125).

According to Wells, “That God is the outside God means at least five important things” (127-33). It means that there is a moral law. It means that there is sin. It means that there is a cross and a divine conquest (or judgment). And it means that there is an obligation, an obligation to recognize “the greatness and holiness of God,” to be transformed by a vision of him that conforms us to the likeness of Christ (133). As Wells observes, “We can always find . . . the outside God because this is how he has revealed himself in Scripture. It is this about himself he wants us to know, for without it we will be adrift on a sea of meaninglessness” (133).

Chapter 5: Self

During the 1960s, American individualism “turned inward” and Americans became obsessed with the self (136). A whole new lexicon of terms entered the popular vocabulary (and imagination) of everyday Americans, terms like *self-esteem*, *self-respect*, *self-actualization*, and *self-realization*. Although one might have expected the evangelical church to resist this new, narcissistic turn toward the self, they actually embraced it rather eagerly (137). Unfortunately, in doing so they entered the realm of the therapeutic and “left the moral world behind” (137). The tragedy of this is that the gospel only makes sense in a moral world. The gospel, after all, is not primarily about therapy for the self, but the forgiveness of objective sin and guilt and reconciliation with a morally pure and holy God through the atoning work of Christ (138). By following some of the latest fads in popular culture, instead of the timeless truths of Scripture,

American evangelicalism has lost much of its fresh, distinctive flavor. It is often so similar to the surrounding culture that people can no longer taste any difference between the two.

Wells argues that this inward turn toward the self came about as a result of “four fundamental changes: . . . the change from virtues to values . . . the change from character to personality . . . the change from nature to self . . . [and] the change from guilt to shame” (143). Although each of these changes is distinct from the others, they nonetheless share many things in common. Therefore, for our purposes, it will be enough to simply consider the first two: the change from virtues to values and the change from character to personality.

Wells uses the term “virtues” to describe that which is objectively good and right “for all people, in all places, and in all times” (143). Such virtues are objective because they are grounded in the unchanging character of the eternal God, who is also the sovereign creator and just judge of all mankind (144). Such virtues contrast strikingly with “values” (the preferred term in our day) which, interestingly, is “a relatively new idea” (146). According to Wells, “values represent the moral talk of a relativistic world” (146). They are not objective, but subjective, and differ from one person to another (146-47). The change from character to personality is somewhat similar. Character, like virtue, has to do with an objective moral order, whereas personality, like values, is part of the subjective, psychological realm. The former has to do with reality, the latter with appearance. As Wells observes, “It is a shift from what is important in itself to how it appears to others” (148).

Since this turn to the self is often based on assumptions which are completely antithetical to biblical Christianity (e.g. the denial of human sinfulness), it is not surprising to find Wells calling upon the church to abandon this ship (165-66). We need to turn from ourselves back to God and begin living lives of “personal sanctity, integrity, and authenticity” (172). If (or when) we do so, we can once again be “the salt and light of which our society stands in such great need” (174). Not only would this be good for the church, it would also be an incalculable blessing to the world.

Chapter 6: Christ

In this chapter, Wells devotes himself to comparing and contrasting two spiritual paths—Christianity and paganism. “One starts with God and reaches into sinful life whereas the other starts in human consciousness and tries to reach above to make connections in the divine” (176). Although there can ultimately be no compromise between these two paths, the church is constantly being courted “by the alternative, counterfeit spirituality” (178). Wells believes this is especially true of the evangelical church in our day (178). He cites statistics which indicate a tremendous public interest in spirituality, combined with hostility toward, or loss of confidence in, organized religion (179). “This new spirituality is about the *private* search for meaning, a search for connection to something larger than the self. It is in fact a self-constructed spirituality” (179). It is this self-oriented, or self-centered, spirituality which Wells believes has infected the evangelical church (181-82). Whereas traditional Christianity teaches that God can only be known because he has chosen to make himself known, especially “in Scripture and in Christ,” this self-oriented spirituality tells us that God can be known “through and within the self, and we piece together our knowledge of him (or her, or it) from the fragments of our experience coupled with our intuitions” (183).

Wells points out that the kingdom of God, as it is described in Scripture, is a rule, namely, “the rule of *God*” (196). This is something only God can accomplish. “We can preach it, but it is God’s to establish” (196). But there “could be no such rule,” says Wells, “unless Christ first bore our sin” (198). And this leads him into a consideration of the doctrine of justification. He observes that at the heart of this doctrine is the astounding claim that “God forgives us our sins because Christ bore their penalty in our place” (199). When we respond to the message of the gospel with personal faith in Christ, a great exchange takes place. “The mechanism of this in Paul,” writes Wells, “is the imputation of sin to Christ and of his righteousness to the believer” (201). Once again, this is the work of God, a work which we can only gratefully receive, in accordance with his grace, through faith alone.

Although Christ's rule is currently contested, even though the back of evil "has already been broken at the cross," God assures us that the day will come when his Son will deliver "the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (204; 1 Cor. 15:24). This, too, is the work of God. It "is not our self-constructed future"—as the alternative spirituality might teach. "It is *God's*. It comes from above, not from below" (207). And this, says Wells, "the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen . . . is the church's truth to tell" (207).

Chapter 7: Church

In Wells' view, the evangelical church is in trouble. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the nineteenth century, he noticed a tendency "toward the average in American society," what he described as the "middling standard" (211). Unfortunately, the evangelical church in America has embraced this tendency with a vengeance. Although evangelicals have often led the way in world missions and evangelism, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, they have also (says Wells) so emphasized the gospel's *simplicity* that they have almost completely neglected its *profundity* (212-13). He laments that this attitude has tended "to produce an understanding of Christianity that is accessible to all but tends to lose its depth and profundity in the process" (212). We need to return to a proper, biblical balance, regarding the *simplicity and profundity* of the gospel. Otherwise, says Wells, we may find the Christian faith itself "beginning to crumble" in our hands (213).

Not only have we drifted away from the profundity of the gospel, but our thinking about the church is often shallow at best. Instead of trying to mimic the surrounding secular culture, we need to remind ourselves that the church has its greatest influence for Christ when it functions as a distinct "alternative" to the culture (224). What does such a counter-cultural church look like? Wells cites with approval the answer given at the time of the Protestant Reformation. A church in which the Lord is actively working will be a church in which "the Word of God is preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is applied"

(225). Granted, all of these might be done and the church may still remain “moribund and lifeless.” All the same, however, “these three marks do get at things that are indispensable in the life of the church” (225).

In the first place, Wells argues that since Scripture is the Word of *God*, it *alone* “is our authority” (226, 230). Although it takes a lot of work, the most effective sermons are those which relate a biblical text to “the center of life as we know it today” (233). Concerning the sacraments, Wells insists that they are rightly administered only when it is absolutely clear that they are not “a substitute for the biblical gospel” (234). They certainly point to the gospel. “They symbolize it. But they do not offer any detour around the necessary exercise of saving faith in the work of Christ on the cross” (234). Finally, concerning discipline, Wells admits that no one is perfect and that the church is composed of redeemed sinners. In spite of this, however, he argues that “in the church we should see enough of Christ’s conquest over sin that grievous violations of expected belief and conduct that flow from this redemption need to be addressed.” This helps insure “that the name of Christ and the reputation of the church are protected” (241).

Wells concludes his book with a passionate plea to “let God be God over the church” (246). God is sovereign, he reminds us, and the church is God’s creation “and only he can grow it” (243). While it is true that “we are God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor 3:9), it is also true that only God can impart new life and sanctify the church (247). And if the evangelical church is ever to be rebuilt, warns Wells, it is only God who can do it (248).