The Theological Corruption of the Evangelical Church

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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH?

In a world that has become increasingly sceptical of, and hostile to, Christianity, where do evangelicals and evangelical churches stand? Many large churches, organisations and leaders in the evangelical fold have significant public profiles or public and political influence, but how effective have they really been in promoting the Christian faith?

I put it to readers that the evangelical church around the world and in Australia has lost its way and is suffering a crisis of identity. Many who call themselves evangelicals have little idea what they believe or why—or even what we are meant to be doing. As Tom Slater put it: “what is the Christian cause? Is it the survival of the church? Is it the ‘success’ of the church? Is it the maintenance of whatever power the church has in the decision-making structures of society? Is it the proclamation of the gospel? Is it social transformation? Is it the Kingdom of God? Our answer to that question shapes how we think we’re going.”¹ That such questions need to be asked is itself an indictment.

Joel Edwards has asserted that evangelicalism “always takes seriously Jesus as the living Word, reigning at the centre of the universe and our lives” and that evangelicals “will not swap his Lordship for our culture.” According to Edwards, evangelicals “are absolutely passionate about renewed people and communities which treat sin and forgiveness seriously. Evangelicals really do want to see God ruling everything…The twenty-first century will pull us in many different directions, but these are the things we should die for.”² These are great sentiments, but they do not reflect the true state of many evangelical communities either in Australia or around the world.

AN IDOLATROUS VIEW OF GOD

For many Christians, God simply meets a previously unmet need: a father, a best mate, a provider, or a gentle loving sugar daddy! While many non-Christians see God as nasty and vindictive, or a cosmic party-pooper, many Christians hold to equally erroneous conceptions of God that bear little resemblance to the Biblical revelation.

Some years ago, A. W. Tozer rightly chastised the church on this very point: “Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.” It does not matter what we or our creeds say. What matters is what we actually do.

Tozer pointed out that a true conception of God is fundamental “not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse.” Indeed, “there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”

Tozer rebuked the church for holding manifestly decadent views of God that were “utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God,” and I believe it is time again for another such rebuke, since, as Tozer pointed out, such ignoble views of God are, in fact, idolatrous:

Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a liebel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is—in itself a monstrous sin—and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges. Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilised peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.3

It is time each of us reassessed how we conceive of God and see if our ideas about God square with His own self-revelation in scripture.

THE ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF SCRIPTURE

That our conception of God often does not reflect His own self-revelation in scripture should be no surprise when we understand that scripture is all too often ignored, neglected or abused by the church. Indeed, scripture has all but been excised from much of our theological deliberations. For example, a 6500 word essay located on the Evangelical Alliance website entitled ‘Eight Core Christian Values,’ cites only one Scripture—and even then it was a mere passing reference or ‘proof text.’4 We have gone from Sola Scriptura to Nulla Scriptura!

In some cases, evangelicals are advocating ideas that are clearly prohibited in scripture! In that same essay, the author states that justice is “[a] concept biased in favour of the disadvantaged”

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despite the fact that Leviticus 19:15 states: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.” Exodus 23:3 states that favoritism should not be shown to a poor man even in a lawsuit. There was also no partiality when Moses took a census and God required an offering of half a shekel from everyone over the age of twenty years (Ex 30:14-15). The rich were explicitly forbidden from giving more, and the poor were explicitly prohibited from giving less.

On the other hand, many scriptures are totally abused and misused. The whole ‘Prayer of Jabez’ phenomenon is a classic example. From a passing reference in two verses (1 Chron 4:9-10) concerning an honourable man who suffered in pain, asking for more land, we got books for adults, women, teens and kids, a bible study guide, a devotional, and a song! All of these things used the Jabez verses to communicate a message that simply was not in the text!

Another example is the exhortation in Micah 6:8 which has been adopted by Micah Challenge. Followers of that organisation believe that acting justly implies advocating for ‘redistributive justice’ imposed by government: rich countries taxing their citizens in order to give aid to poorer countries. But Micah 6 takes the form of a law suit. The prophet, on behalf of the Lord, brings a case against Israel. The prophet proclaims that God ultimately requires all His people to act justly. The Hebrew word used clearly refers to the administration and maintenance of justice in relation to resolving legal disputes. It never refers to anything close to ‘social’ or ‘distributive’ justice. That is eisegesis not exegesis!

Biblical truth as revealed in Scripture defines Christianity and guides Christian practice. Once our theological confession loses its scriptural foundation, “it finds its subject matter anywhere along a line that runs from Eastern spirituality to radical politics to feminist ideology to environmental concerns.” Indeed, many evangelical churches have, in one way or another, exchanged biblical truth for these very things and other sensibilities of modern culture.

In addition, even when scripture is cited, it often lacks absolute authority. As David Wells pointed out, when it comes to interpreting scripture, “[e]very person’s intuitions are granted equal value… Common access to truth is understood to mean common possession of truth. If everyone’s intuitions stand on the same plane, it is assumed that they are equally valid, equally true, and equally useful.” Rather than a search for what God is saying to all of us, church bible studies descend into pools of ignorance where participants exchange thoughts about what some verse means to them personally. Derrida has infiltrated the church!

In trying to relate to postmodernists many within the church have inadvertently adopted or incorporated the postmodernist mindset, including rejection of, or scepticism toward, absolute truth claims, including the truth claims in scripture. But instead of trying to ‘relate’ to postmodernists we ought to be destroying the philosophical foundations of postmodernism—what little foundations there are!

**DISTORTION OF THE GOSPEL AND CHRISTIAN MISSION**

The gospel is not about love but about justice; not ‘social justice’ but true moral justice. All humanity has rebelled against God and His justice demands death. The good news is that Christ’s

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2 Wells, 216.
3 This is apparent in the writings of Brian McLaren and Rob Bell and many others in the Emergent movement.
death and resurrection has satisfied God’s demand for justice. A Christian is someone who has accepted God’s gift of salvation and who embarks on a journey, with the indwelling Spirit, to seek personal righteousness and to bring others to Christ.

Yet for many evangelicals the quest for personal righteousness has been replaced by a desire to feel morally superior: to feel as if you stand on the right side of a deeply moral argument. Moreover, interest in doctrine and truth and concern for the lost has gradually been replaced by a therapeutic faith that looks inward and is more focused on surviving the word rather than changing it.

Unlike Christ, many evangelicals have become entirely focussed on ‘social justice’ and seem completely uninterested in reaching out to the poor with the gospel. Don’t the poor also need to know that they are creatures of God, that they have rebelled against their Creator, that all people are sinful and inclined to do evil, and therefore stand condemned, but that there is salvation and deliverance through Jesus Christ? Yet Christian organisations like World Vision no longer preach the gospel to the poor, being content with meeting their material needs only.

In many evangelical churches and organisations the central Christian message has been expunged, and replaced with Christianised socialism. As Nobel Prize winning economist Friedrich Hayek noted, clergymen have been active promoters of social justice, “while increasingly losing their faith in a supernatural revelation” and “appear to have sought a refuge and consolation in a new ‘social’ religion which substitutes a temporal for a celestial promise of justice, and who hope that they can thus continue their striving to do good.” 8 Similarly, Mark Steyn noted that “[m]ost mainline Protestant churches are, to one degree or another, post-Christian. If they no longer seem disposed to converting the unbelieving to Christ, they can at least convert them to the boggiest of soft-left political cliches.” 9

This is not to say that addressing social issues is unimportant, but this should not be the church’s prime focus or priority. Themes of social justice (e.g. caring for the poor, refugees, abolishing slavery etc.) are not the primary focus of, or are inconspicuously absent from, the NT writings. This is because social transformation comes about as a result of spiritual transformation. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for vocal self-appointed Christian spokespersons—especially those that incline to the political left—to disparage and even condemn other Christians who have different ministry priorities, who reject their social justice theology and who view their social reform agenda as unbiblical and ineffective. Those who refuse to sign up to the socialist agenda of the ‘Christian left’ are derided as being uncaring and self-absorbed and part of a dumbed-down consumerist culture. But such derision is not only unfair, it is presumptuous arrogance. Moreover, it is ironic that vocal Christian spokespersons routinely condemn materialism or consumerism yet constantly talk only about material justice. They appear concerned only with material needs (i.e. material assistance for the poor, the oppressed, the ‘alien’, the vulnerable, asylum seekers, low paid workers etc.) and completely unconcerned with their spiritual needs even though it is a person’s spiritual standing that has eternal consequences.

The Evangelical Alliance and other evangelical organisations have pushed for a ‘Public Theology Network’ linking theological and ethical institutions and ‘think-tanks.’ The problem is that much of what passes for ‘public theology’ and Christian policy positions are completely divorced from both Scriptural teaching and political reality. In many instances, they seem to have been lifted straight from the green-left policy handbook!

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For example, Slater notes: “It would be odd not to mention the divisive issue of homosexuality in the churches, especially the ordination of practising homosexuals. If homosexuality is the central focus of our attention we are in deep trouble. Yet it is a big issue to be sure, both ethically and theologically, pointing up as it does deep underlying contradictions about how we understand the church’s relationship with Scripture and culture.”¹⁰ We are in deep trouble not because homosexuality is a “central focus of our attention” but because it is an issue at all in light of the clear teaching on homosexuality in scripture (Lev 18:22; Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9).

Much of the public commentary emanating from evangelical spokesmen displays a great deal of political, legal and economic naivety. Too many evangelicals appear to think that a doctorate in theology or ministry automatically qualifies them to speak out on matters of law, economics, industrial relations etc. Not surprisingly, their utterings—if they receive any attention at all—are greeted with the derision and contempt they deserve.

Fortunately there are some Christians who stand up and speak truth to the world: the Jensen brothers, Cardinal Pell and Fred Nile come to mind. These, too, have received more than their fair share of derision but this is because they more often than not speak truth to a world that is reluctant to hear it. Of course, it would be a mistake to regard these men or other politically active conservative Christians, or the public expressions from the pentecostal movement as being representative of all evangelicalism. But it would be an even bigger mistake to regard the likes of Tim Costello and other outspoken Christians emanating from the political left as true representatives of evangelicalism. Some of these people have even suggested that Christians getting into politics are “really just right-wingers hijacking Christian language and imagery to cynically exploit Christian concerns for their own political benefit.”¹¹ Again, this is grossly presumptuous yet all too typical of the hubris coming from some Christians on the political left.

It appears that many evangelical leaders are more interested in gaining respect and a media profile than expanding the kingdom of God. Indeed, many sound just like another left-wing political lobbyist albeit with a Christian face. One has to wonder if there is an element of vanity and egoism at play. Indeed, far too many Christians are more interested in ‘feeling good’ rather than actually doing good. T. S. Eliot once said: “Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don’t mean to do harm—but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.”¹² Serving God involves more than making self-righteous pronouncements and moral posturing. Jesus told a parable about a father who asked his two sons to work in his vineyard (Matt 21:28-31). The first son initially refused but later changed his mind and went. The second son promised to work but never did so. Jesus’ point was that, when it comes to doing God’s will, it is not what we say that counts but what we actually do. Many Christians may say all the right things and have the best of intentions but if they are not actively ministering to God’s people or working to expand the kingdom of God, then they can hardly claim to be doing God’s will.

A CALL FOR REFORMATION AND REVIVAL

Jesus said: “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the

¹⁰ Slater
light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt 5:13-16).

While there are many great evangelical people and churches, it is my contention that the evangelical movement in Australia has hidden its light and lost its saltiness. It is ultimately a crisis of leadership. Too many of our current evangelical leaders are more interested in ‘main-streaming’—seeking the respect of secular power-brokers and favours from government. As J. P. Moreland has noted, we ought to be suspicious of evangelical leaders “whose primary agenda seems to be to remove embarrassment about being an evangelical and to assure their colleagues that they are really acceptable, rational people in spite of their evangelicalism.” He adds: “While we need to be sensitive to our unbelieving friends and colleagues, we should care far less about what the world thinks than about what God thinks of our intellectual life. Fidelity to God and His cause is the core commitment of a growing Christian mind.”

We should embrace the world’s ridicule, scorn and condemnation. Indeed, this is often proof that we are doing the right thing. As Jesus said: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt 5:11-12).

Francis Schaeffer pointed out many years ago that “our culture, society, government, and law are in the condition they are in, not because of a conspiracy, but because the church has forsaken its duty to be the salt of the culture. It is the church’s duty (as well as its privilege) to do now what it should have been doing all the time—to use the freedom we do have to be that salt of the culture.”

Too many evangelical churches are moving away from scriptural fidelity and sound doctrine in order to appear more ‘hip’ and appealing to the younger, idealistic and post-modernist generation. Now, a ‘good’ church is one that is culturally relevant and has a social conscience. As Wells has pointed out, love of God has been subsumed by love of neighbour: “And then this love of neighbor itself underwent further transformation so that faith came to mean little more than seeking justice in the world, and while that is a characteristically Christian concern, it is not distinctively Christian.”

Evangelical leaders need to reassess what they are doing, where they are heading, and what is driving them. All leaders must ask: “Am I doing this because I love God and His people, or because I desire worldly recognition? Am I fulfilling the Great Commission? Am I preparing and strengthening my sheep for spiritual warfare?” The evangelical movement needs to return to its scriptural roots and refocus on teaching sound theology derived from scripture. Sound, biblically based theology is necessary for both Christian ethics and practice. Indeed, we do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them a true, undistorted view of God and His mission. This will be of far greater value to them than any sermon on ‘social justice.’

15 Wells, 254.