

The Courage to Be Protestant (Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World) by David Wells, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 2008 (74 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

CHAPTER 1. *The Lay of the Evangelical Land*

1. The Lay of the Evangelical Land

It takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant. After all, millions have done so through the West. They are not in any peril. To live by the truths of historic Protestantism, however, is an entirely different matter. That takes courage in today's context. [Page 1]

2. The Lay of the Evangelical Land

The truths of historic Protestantism are sometimes no more welcome in evangelicalism than they are in the outside culture. [Page 1]

3. The Map: Culture

In the last two or three decades evangelicals have discovered culture. That actually sounds more flattering than I intend. I would welcome a serious discussion about culture. We should be exploring what it is and how it works, rather than just looking at polls to see what is hot. A serious engagement with culture, though, is not what most evangelicals are about. [Page 3]

4. The Map: Culture

What is the binding authority on the church? What determines how it thinks, what it wants, and how it is going to go about its business? Will it be Scripture alone, Scripture understood as God's binding address, or will it be culture? Will it be what is current, edgy, and with-it? Or will it be God's Word, which is always contemporary because its truth endures for all eternity? [Page 4]

5. Classical Evangelicals: Doctrine Shrinks

In the 1970s and 1980s, on every side and in almost every way, it was becoming clear that ways of doctrinal thinking were wearing very thin. The capacity to think doctrinally was being lost as new leaders emerged, as the leadership of the evangelical world shifted from the older pastor-theologians to the newer entrepreneurial organization builders, and as churches began to reflect this change in their attitudes and worship. And, of course, it was a shift mirrored in *Christianity Today*.

The erosion in biblical ways of thinking at first passed almost unnoticed. Nevertheless, after a while it was hard to miss the fact that this was happening. No doubt there were many specific causes. Campus organizations were undoubtedly reducing Christian faith to its most minimal form. And as serious biblical preaching in the churches diminished, ignorance of biblical truth became commonplace. But the largest factor in

this internal change, I think, was that evangelicalism began to be infested by the culture in which it was living. And then Christianity became increasingly reduced simply to private, internal, therapeutic experience. It's doctrinal form atrophied and then crumbled. [Page 8]

6. Classical Evangelicals: *Doctrine Shrinks*

The unraveling of evangelical truth was signaled initially in an odd series of definitional tags that became evident in the 1980s and 1990s. That was when a whole series of hybrids emerged: feminist evangelicals, ecumenical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who were evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelicals who were Catholic, or charismatic—signaled that the additional interest was at least as important as the core principles of what defined who an evangelical was. Indeed, the additional interest usually said far more about the person's interests than anything else. The core principals, in fact, were losing their power to shape people, define the movement, prescribe who was and who was not an evangelical. [Page 9]

7. Classical Evangelicals: *Doctrine Shrinks*

The last time I walked over the bridge that links Zambia and Zimbabwe, just below the Victoria Falls, I watched a bungee jumper launch himself into space from the center of the bridge. The waters beneath are some four hundred feet down, full of froth and crocodiles. This is Africa. Equipment of the kind he was using may not be tested regularly and replaced on schedule. In fact, what I saw were cords that appeared already to have been overused. They were very frayed, and I wondered how long it would be before an intrepid bungee jumper did not make the return journey to the bridge's edge and simply continued into the churning waters in the gorge far, far below.

Something like this has happened in the evangelical world. The cords plaited together out of the formal and material principles became frayed and then, for an increasing number, snapped. They are no longer able to return the jumpers to the fellowship. [Page 9]

8. Classical Evangelicals: *Marketers*

What results, all too often, beneath all the smiling crowds, the packed auditoria, is a faith so cramped, limited, and minuscule as to be entirely unable to command our life, our energies, or, as a matter of fact, even much of our attention. One church advertises itself as a place where you will find "loud music" and "short services". It has a "casual atmosphere" but, it wants us to know, it also offers "serious faith"

This is always the rub in this experiment: the form greatly modifies the content. The loud music and short services are part of the form, but the form, put together to be pleasing, actually undercuts the seriousness of the faith. The form is in fact the product, and in this market the sale has to be done quickly and as painlessly as possible because the customers all have itchy feet. That greatly militates against the seriousness

any church wants to have. And that is why a deep chasm has opened between the church marketers and historic Protestant orthodoxy. It is less that the truths of this orthodoxy are assailed than that they are seen to be irrelevant to the building of the church. They are, it is believed, an impediment to its success. [Page 14]

9. Classical Evangelicals: *Marketers*

When the evangelical world became Willow Creek-sized, the sun began to set on Willow Creek. Its cachet went down the tubes. If Willow Creek could not move on fashion-wise, others not quite so wed to its particular mode of doing things could. And so it has happened. [Page 15]

10. Classical Evangelicals: *Marketers*

Emergents, as I shall call them, are about deconstruction. This is an important point. They have not sought to be movement builders because that, in a way, would defy their essential posture of pulling away from everything else. They are skeptical of power and its structures. They are not pulling in toward each other either. They are simply talking, and a few are writing books.

What they are against is often clearer than what they are for. However, they are united in thinking that classical evangelicalism, especially in its Reformed configuration, is part and parcel of modernity. By this they mean that it is rationalist. And by that they mean it imagines that people can actually know truth with some certainty. That, they believe, is pretentious, fraudulent, and arrogant.

What emergents are against in the Willow Creeky, marketing movement is its emptiness, loss of personal connections in its monster-sized churches, and capitulation to consumerist modernity. This produces a reduced, skinny Christianity with no depth and no mystery. Emergents are postmodern in these ways, they say, not modern and their style is often attuned more to Gen X and the millennials than to the boomers. They think of themselves, too, as being postconservative rather than simply evangelical. [Page 16]

11. The Fall of the Empire: *Are You an Evangelical?*

The truth is that evangelicals have brought this bad press upon themselves. There have been just too many instances of obnoxious empire-building going on, too much in evangelicalism that is partisan and small, too much pandering to seekers, and too much adaptation of the Christian message until little remains. Too many of its leaders have been disgraced. There have been too many venal television preachers. There are too many of the born again who show no signs of regenerate life. For many people, the word “evangelical” has become a synonym for what is trite, superficial, and moneygrubbing, a byword for what has gone wrong with Protestantism

Those who still think of themselves as being in the tradition of historic Christian faith, as I do, may therefore want to consider whether the term “evangelical” has not outlived its usefulness. Despite its honorable pedigree, despite its many outstanding leaders both past and some in the present, and despite the many genuine and upright believers who still think of themselves as evangelical, it may now have to be abandoned. [Page 19]

12. The Fall of the Empire: *If Not Evangelical, What?*

In this book I am nevertheless going to think of myself as a biblical Christian first and foremost, as in continuity with Christians across the ages who have believed the same truth and followed the same Lord. The period in which these truths were brought into the most invigorating, health-giving focus was the Reformation. I therefore think of myself as Reformational in the sense that I affirm its solas: in Scripture alone is God’s authoritative truth found, in Christ alone is salvation found, it is by grace alone that we are saved, and this salvation is received through faith alone. Only after each of these affirmations is made can we say that salvation from start to finish is to the glory of God alone. These affirmations do not stand simply as solitary, disconnected sentinels, but they are the key points in an integrated, whole understanding of biblical truth. This is what gives us a place to stand in the world from which to understand who we are, what the purposes of God are, and what future lies before us. These are the things that historic Protestants believe, and that is what I am.

This is what I think offers the only real hope for our postmodern world. Not only so, but I carries in it the best help for the evangelical world in its wounded and declining state today. I do not know what the evangelical future will be, but I am certain evangelicalism has not good future unless it finds this kind of direction again.

This will take some courage. The key to the future is not the capitulation that we see in both the marketers and the emergents. It is courage. The courage to be faithful to what Christianity in its biblical forms has always stood for across the ages. [Pages 20-21]

CHAPTER 2. Christianity for Sale

13. Sale: Prices slashed!: *A Moment’s Reflection*

The Putman thesis of the 1960s is correct: we are in touch with everyone potentially, but we know and are known by almost no one in particular. [Page 31]

14. Sale: Prices slashed!: *Walmart Churches*

It would be quite wrong to suggest that pastors and other leaders in a local church have an authority that operates with near certain infallibility, or that what they think should be beyond question, or that their teaching, if they still offer such in church, cannot be

questioned. All should be held accountable before the same standard that is the Word of God. [Page 38]

15. Sale: Prices slashed!: *Down With The Traditional Churches!*

Across much of evangelicalism, but especially in the market-driven churches, one therefore sees a new kind of leadership among pastors now. Gone is the older model of the scholar-saint, one who was as comfortable with books and learning as with the aches of the soul. This was the shepherd who knew the flock, knew how to tend it, and Sunday by Sunday took that flock into the treasures of God's Word. This has changed. In its place is the new "celebrity" style. What we typically see now, Nancy Pearcey suggests, is the leader who works by manipulating the feelings of the audience, enhancing his own image with personal anecdotes, modeling himself after the CEO, and adopting a domineering management style. He (usually) is completely results-oriented, pragmatic, happy to employ any technique from the secular world that will produce the desired results. And this leader has to be magnetic, entertaining, and light on the screen up front. [Page 40]

16. A Word of Praise: *Evangelical Stagnation*

...it is probably impossible to know exactly what the spiritual realities are in America today. This, I know, sounds quite nonsensical. Do we not have polls? Has not George Barna delivered the goods for us? Barna indeed has been busy. However, polls are at best only approximations of very complex internal realities. [Page 42]

17. Excuse Me!: *Wrong Result*

The first mistake the church marketers made was refusing to see that what they had been doing had miscarried.

In 1991, 88 percent of evangelical pastors said they were favorably disposed to this new approach on the ground that it worked. And subsequently, the overwhelming majority, in small or large ways, became seeker-sensitive. The problem, however, is that the approach that seemed so promising at the beginning has not worked. And the truth is that it *cannot* work because it is so internally flawed. [Page 45]

18. Excuse Me!: *Wrong Result*

Christianity is not just an experience, we need to remember, but it is about truth. The experience of being reconciled to the Father, through the Son, by the work of the Holy Spirit all happens within a worldview. This worldview is the way God has taught us in his Word to view the world. That is why the Bible begins with Genesis 1:1 and not John 3:16. It begins by setting out the distinction, as against paganism, between Creator and creation. It then lays out an understanding of God in his nature and redemptive works as well as an understanding of who humans are in their nature and their fallenness. All of this sets the stage for the coming of Christ, for his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. It is on this basis that God's wrath is assuaged, our sin is judged, our

alienation is overcome, and we who are by nature unrighteous are made righteous in Christ. This happens only because of his grace and only through the empty hand of faith by which all of this is received. A Christian worldview, then, is one that rests upon a biblical understanding of the world, God, ourselves, and the redemptive work of Christ. [Pages 45-46]

19. Excuse Me!: Wrong Result

It seems rather clear, then, that the market defining most churches today is the one in which people are seeking some spiritual connection but, at the same time, are opposed to things religious. By that, they have in mind doctrines to be believed that they have not defined for themselves, moral norms to be followed that they have not set up for themselves, and corporate practice that is expected. Skip the religion: give us the meat and potatoes of what is spiritual, they are saying. That is what they marketing churches are attempting to do. So, it is no great revelation that those who are fed this trashy diet are frequently those with no worldview and in whose life biblical doctrine has little place.

Perhaps the crowing disappointment in this whole undertaking is the dismal failure of the worship services that were considered the marketers' piece de resistance. In fact, eight of ten believers do not experience the presence of God in their worship at all. Is this really such a stunning outcome to services in which the centrality of truth has disappeared, biblical categories have been lost, and the entertainment ethos dominates everything? [Pages 46-47]

20. Excuse Me!: Wrong Result

George Barna was one of the primary architects of this new approach to "doing" church. He was in on the ground floor three decades ago. As the church's most assiduous poller, he undoubtedly expected by this time to be the bearer of good news once his marketing strategies were widely adopted, as they have been. It has not turned out that way. It has fallen to him to be the most important chronicler of his own failure.

Leaving behind this long trail of failure as if it had never happened, Barna has nevertheless struck out in a new direction with the same old panache, bravado, and undented self-assurance. The evangelical world has neither gasped nor blinked. In 2005 he published his book *Revolution*, which predicted that the church in the coming decade would lose much of its "market share", but never mind, because now it could climb aboard a different cultural trend and succeed even more spectacularly. Now, serious spiritual revolutionaries can simply cut themselves loose from every local church. Just walk away! Permanently. And find biblical Christianity elsewhere.

What is resulting from Barna's approach is barely recognizable as Christian today. And that is what makes the desire of some of the leading American marketing pastors to

export their experiment to the rest of the world almost incomprehensible. It certainly is an expression of unbounded chutzpah.

The truth is that no matter how proficiently we learn to “do” church for the Western, affluent, highly individualistic market, we are doomed to failure. Indeed, the more proficient we become, if that proficiency requires that we denude ourselves of theology, the more certainly we doom ourselves to failure. The method is inherently flawed. If it succeeds in replicating itself at all, it will only be replicating its own failure. That is what the marketers have failed to see. [Page 47-48]

21. Excuse Me!: *Wrong Analogy*

In both forms of marketing – in the world and in the church – the result is an exchange of goods. In the one, a new sound system, a new BMW, or the latest and most alluring perfume. In the other, eternal life.

So, what is wrong with this? What is wrong if it clearly works? After all, some churches that have marketed themselves and their product, the gospel, have grown rather astoundingly, though those that have failed rarely get noticed. Can we argue with success?

I believe that we can. More than that, I believe, in this case, that we should. What we have here are churches reconfigured around evangelism that abandon much of the fabric of biblical faith to succeed. They have taken a part of that faith, modified it in deference to consumer impulse, and then made of that part all that there is to Christian faith. Here is a methodology for success that can succeed with very little truth; indeed, its success seems to depend on not showing much truth. After all, evangelical churches aren't the only ones walking this road – some liberal mainline churches are trying to do so, too, taking a page out of this playbook. So are some Catholic churches. And in Los Angeles there is the nine-thousand-member Agape International Spiritual Center, which makes no pretense to being Christian but has enjoyed great success by emulating the Willow Creek model. It boasts a million friends worldwide and casts itself in the New Thought-Ancient Wisdom tradition of spirituality, happily melding in its worship the “ohm-m-m's” of Eastern religion and the praise choruses of Christian churches. Now, that's what you call blended worship! [Pages 51-52]

22. Excuse Me!: *Wrong Analogy*

Success can be had along marketing lines, but truth is not an intrinsic part of that success. There is the formula. Does that not raise a red flag? Is the gospel not about truth? The Christian message is not about anything else than the “truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5), the “truth [as it] is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:21). Gospel truth, biblically speaking, is not a formula, not simply a relationship, not just about spirituality. It is about the triune God acting in this world redemptively, in the course of time, in the fabric of history, and bringing all of this to its climax in Christ. The message of the cross is the

message that corresponds to what God actually did in space and time. And this is all a part of a whole. The whole is all that God has unveiled of himself and of how he views the world. [Page 52]

23. Excuse Me!: Wrong Analogy

That is where this gospel really parts company from the way in which products and services are marketed in our modernized world. These products and services are nothing more than products and services. They are simply there for our use. The gospel is not. The gospel calls us not to use it but to submit to the God of the universe through his Son. A methodology for success that circumvents issues of truth is one that will rapidly emancipate itself from biblical Christianity or, to put it differently, will rapidly eviscerate biblical faith.

That, indeed, is what is happening because the marketing model if followed, empties the truth out of the gospel. First, the needs consumers have are needs *they* identify for themselves. The needs sinners have are needs God identifies for us, and the way we see our needs is rather different from the way he sees them. We suppress the truth about God, holding it down in “unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). We are not subject to his moral law and in our fallenness are incapable of being obedient to it (Rom. 8:7), so how likely is it, outside of the intervention of God through the Holy Spirit, that we will identify our needs as those arising from our rebellion against God? No, the product we will seek naturally will not be the gospel. It will be a therapy of some kind, a technique for life, perhaps a way of connecting more deeply with our own spiritual selves on our own terms, terms that require no repentance and no redemption. It will not be the gospel. The gospel cannot be a product that the church sells because there are no consumers for it. When we find consumers, we will find that what they are interested in buying, on their own terms, is not the gospel. [Pages 52-53]

24. Excuse Me!: Wrong Analogy

...when we buy a product, we buy it for our use. When we accept Christ, he is not there for our use but we are there for his service. We commit ourselves to him in a way that we do not commit ourselves to any product. There is a world of difference between the Lord of Glory, the incarnate second person of the Godhead, and a Lexus, a vacation home, or a trip to the Bahamas. The marketing analogy blurs all of this, reducing Christ simply to a product we buy to satisfy our needs. What is destroyed along the way are the biblical doctrines of sin, of the incarnation, and of redemption. The marketing analogy is the wrong analogy. It is deeply harmful to Christian faith. This harm is immediately apparent when we see that it has produced a kind of spirituality that is indistinguishable from the spirituality in the culture. That spirituality is predominantly non-Christian. [Pages 53]

25. Excuse Me!: Wrong Customer

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke asked a similar question in *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*. How can we explain the fact that at the time of the Revolution only 17 percent belonged to a church, by the time of the Civil War, it was 37 percent, and by 1980 it was 62 percent? What explains this steady conquest of the American soul? And what explains why some churches succeed and other do not, some gain ground and others lose it?

Their answer was that in a free society there is a market for religion. It works like the market for goods and services, which is what the seeker-sensitive also think. But what Stark and Finke said was that the content of the faith, its *doctrine*, had in the past been vital to the success of Christian churches and not, as they seeker-sensitive imagine, an impediment to success. Specifically, they argued that churches that flourish exhibit a high degree of distinction from the culture, of cognitive dissonance. Failure often has followed the disappearance of this distinction and distance. The reason is that people in the past have been looking for something different, something that cannot be had under a secular guise. Churches that have offered this have flourished. Churches that lose their distinction from the surrounding culture have failed and disappeared. [Page 55-56]

26. Excuse Me!: Wrong Customer

Marketers also have tried to capitalize on the trendy generational studies of the last two decades. have we not all heard generalizations about boomers and Gen Xers? Can we not all conjugate these differences? Boomers are this...Xers are that. These studies heighten generational differences, often fuel generational antagonisms, and overlook what people are people have in common. What we all have in common is that we all are made in the image of the same God. Those who are redeemed – if I may use biblical language – are redeemed by the same Christ, are regenerated by the same Spirit, and have the same truth and goals. Generational distinctions change none of this. When what was generationally distinctive became the total focus, red flags should have gone up instantly. Instead, churches could only drool over the sudden prospects of the extraordinary success that seemed just around the corner. [Page 56]

27. Excuse Me!: Wrong Customer

Does not the gospel call into fellowship those whom a society divides? There, side by side, should we not see the rich and the poor, men and women, powerful and marginalized, boomer and nonboomer all united in the same Christ by whom they have all been bought? [Page 57]

28. Excuse Me!: The Bottom Line

There is a yearning in the evangelical world today. We encounter it everywhere. It is a yearning for what is real. Sales pitches, marketed faith, the gospel as commodity, people as customers, God as just a prop to my inner life, the glitz and sizzle, Disneyland

on the loose in our churches – all of it is skin deep and often downright wrong. It is not making serious disciples. It cannot make serious disciples. It brims with success, but it is empty, shallow, and indeed unpardonable.

It is time to reach back into the Word of God, as we have not done in a generation, and find again a serious faith for our undoubtedly serious times. It is now time to close the door on this disastrous experiment in retailing faith, to do so politely but nevertheless firmly. It is time to move on. It is time to become Protestant once again. [Pages 57-58]

CHAPTER 3. Truth

29. The self is disconnected

My conclusion is that absolute truth and morality are fast receding in society because their grounding in God as objective, as outside of our self, as our transcendent point of reference, is disappearing. 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. [Pages 61]

30. What is truth?

The Christian notion of truth is not unrelated to these other considerations. It assumes, given the revelation that God has provided in the biblical Word, that we can know his character and intentions in a way that corresponds to what is there. Undoubtedly the writers of Scripture, being human, were fallible. However, 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.

The outcome is a revelation that is truthful. This revelation reflects who God is. Because he is utterly pure in character, it is impossible for him to lie (Heb. 6:18; cf. Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; 1 John 1:5). We are sometimes deceitful and untruthful, but this is quite impossible with God. He cannot be other than what he is as holy. He cannot have given God. He cannot be other than what he is as holy. He cannot have given us "truth" that is untrue. And because he is all-knowing, and has known the end from the beginning, it is impossible for him to be mistaken as humans often are.

The fact of inspiration, then, means that whatever deficiencies the writers had as fallible human beings that whatever deficiencies the writers had as fallible human beings did not have any part in the revelation as given. Nor is it possible for God to give us a deliberately false "read" on reality. Nor can he be mistaken in the "read" he has given to us, however unintentionally, because his own knowledge is true, comprehensive, and complete.

What Scripture says, therefore, God says. That is the correlation that Scripture itself makes repeatedly. And what God says is the exact reflection of what is there, whether this is in his own character, plans, and intentions, or in the world, in the human heart, and in our human future. [Pages 74-75]

31. Christian Truth: *Biblical Baseline*

...what should the church believe about truth and why?

Is it possible for anyone to miss the clarion call that sounds forth in the words and gospel-actions of the apostles? Surely not! Although they were encircled by many superstitions, many religious claims, and were constantly under the gaze of a Roman power that demanded their total allegiance at pain of death, they nevertheless declared that truth, truth of enduring and absolute kind, had been born. Christ was the culmination to the long history in which God's redemptive acts had occurred. Now these acts had reached their apex and culmination in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-4; Gal. 4:4-6; John 1:14; 14:6). In him the revelation that had been partial had been completed, what had been fragmentary had now been brought to a final synthesis. It was this claim that rattled the bones of the Caesars and, in time, led to state-sponsored persecution.

The Christianity that grew from this moment, though, spread with astonishing speed through the apostles' declaration of the gospel and the simple witness of those who had come to know Christ. This proclamation was not simply a telling of their private experience, nor just their own personal opinion. It was not what had become truth for *them*. It was a proclamation about truth for *all*. The gospel, which is the same gospel for all people, in all ages, and at all times, is "the word of truth" (Eph. 1:13; see also Col. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 10:26). Faith is about "obeying the truth" (Gal. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:22). Those who are condemned are condemned because they do not believe the "truth" (2 Thess. 2:12). Those who are depraved in mind are depraved because they are "deprived of the truth" (1 Tim. 6:5). This faith, which is all about the truth that God has given us, is delivered through his truth (2 Cor. 4:2) and is made effective by the Spirit who is the Spirit of truth (1 John 5:6). Christianity in short, is from first to last all about *truth!* IT is about he who is the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life.

In an earlier time it would have been unnecessary to make this argument. Surely, this is what all Christians thought, was it not? Furthermore, the language of truth had been a stock ingredient in all Western thought for a long time. It was not simply a Christian interest. Of course, people had for centuries debated about what was true and what was not. They had disagreed sharply on some specific issues, but the *notion* of truth was not itself in dispute. That, in a way, is what explains the fact that there was any debate at all. Those who do not believe that we can come to a knowledge of what is true waste no time in debating about it.

Christianity is supernatural religion. It is the exact opposite of all paganisms, ancient or (post)modern. It is about the one God who has made himself known, who has provided an objective truth through the inspired biblical writers, and who, in his grace, has provided the subjective conditions within their hearts of sinners whereby that truth can be received, understood, and obeyed. Those in the evangelical church today who are being lured by the siren call of postmodern relativism, who are increasingly uncertain that truth can be known, or that it matter all that much anyway, would do well to ponder the fact that this uncertainty goes to the very heart of what Christianity is all about. [Pages 75-77]

32. Christian Truth: *Muddled Emergents*

What we hear from many of the emergent church leaders who are most aware of the (post)modern ethos, therefore, is a studied uncertainty: “We do not know.” “We cannot know for sure.” “No one can know certainly.” “We should not make judgments.” “Knowing beyond doubt is not what Christianity is about.” “We need to be more modest.” “We need to be more honest.” “Christianity is about the search, not about the discovery.” “Christianity is about the spiritual journey, not about arriving.” They forget that Scripture is divine *revelation*. It is not a collection of opinions of how different people see things that tells us more about the people than the things. No. It gives us God’s perfect knowledge of himself and of all reality. It is given to us in a form we can understand. The reason God gave it to us is that he wants us to know. Not to guess. Not to have vague impressions. And certainly not to be misled. He wants us to know. It is not immodest, nor arrogant, to claim that we know, when what we know is what God has given us to know through his Word. [Pages 77, 78]

33. Christian Truth: *Biblical Heartbeat*

Truth statements do indeed correspond to what is out there. Biblical affirmations are neither arbitrary nor provisional but have all the weight of eternity behind them. And the biblical authors clearly assume that despite capacities for misreading our own desires into this truth, seeing only what we want to see, refusing to see what is actually there, we can still know this truth. And this is so despite the many innocent mistakes that we might also make in reading the Scriptures.

In the biblical view, we know the *truth* and not just arbitrary rule and approximations. This knowledge of what is “there” includes the truth about Christ (1 John 5:20), about God (2:13-14), his character (3:16), his redemptive purposes (3:5), our own nature (1:6, 8-11), and the (postmodern) “world” we inhabit that is filled with “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions” and is also “passing away along with its desires” (2:16-17). On all these matters we have God’s truth, and for the church to be shy about saying “We know....We know....We know” is an act of self-betrayal. More than that, it allows the vacuum in our intra/post/spatialities to be filled with all those (post)modern multivocalities that are saying, “We are too modest to know....No one needs to know....Only the arrogant claim to know.” [Page 80]

33. Christian Truth: *Biblical Heartbeat*

With respect to the church, Scripture is God's all-sufficient, complete, and unchangeable guide and gift for the life of his people in this world. Paul speaks of "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). There is a finality, a completeness, to what has been delivered, and Scripture is our only account of that teaching. It is a teaching that is not modified in every succeeding generation, otherwise it could not have been given "once for all." It is not so modified by our own social location so that we cannot get what God wants us to have. [Page 81]

34. Christian Truth: *Biblical Heartbeat*

That being the case, is it any surprise to discover that apostolic Christianity was shaped into a set of clear teachings, now the doctrines of Scripture? Sometimes these are simply called "teaching" (Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 3:10) or "the standard of teaching" (Rom. 6:17) or "doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10): "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught," Paul says (Rom. 16:17; cf. Heb. 2:1; 1 John 2:24). In the Pastorals we find more varied language. Besides "teaching," we also have "the faith" (Titus 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:9), "the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3), the "pattern of the sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13), or "the deposit" (1Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14).

Christianity, in these and texts like them, is described as the faith, the truth, the pattern of sound words, the traditions, the sound doctrine, and what was delivered in the beginning. This is what the apostles taught, it is what they believed, it is what they "delivered" to the church, it is what is "entrusted" to the church. Christians are those who "believe" this teaching, who "know" it, who "have" it, who "stand" in it, and who are "established" in it. The New Testament letters were written to remind believers about their responsibilities in relation to this teaching, this faith that has been delivered to the church in its final and completed form. The apostles, we read, write to "remind" them of it, urge them to "pay close attention" to it, to "stand firm" in it, to "follow" it, to "hold" onto it, to "guard" it as one might a precious jewel, and to "contend" earnestly for this truth.

Can we see the most basic point here? It is that the church in its earliest days was a learning community. What it was learning was the ways of God, his character, his acts, through the truth he had given and was giving them. This they knew was indispensable for a life of obedience in this world.

By contrast, all of this is conspicuous by its absence in much of the contemporary evangelical church. Knowledge of the Bible ranks low in how the born-again judge themselves. And the preaching of the Bible's truth has all but disappeared from many churches. We are today walking away from what we see modeled for us in the book of Acts as God's will for the church. [Pages 84-85]

35. Christian Truth: *Evangelical Adventures*

In recent years this understanding of biblical inspiration and its resulting authority in all of life has been undergoing a major revision among some evangelicals. The revision, on the high end, is evident in the work of N.T. Wright, for example, and I. Howard Marshall; it is evident on the low end in experimenters like Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and a host of other cultural *fashionistas*. [Page 85]

36. Christian Truth: *Evangelical Adventures*

A line connects Marshall and Wright to Bell and McLaren. It is that the authority of God functions separately from the written Scriptures. Marshall thinks the Spirit has liberated us from some of what is in Scripture; Wright thinks the Scriptures were never given to function as absolute truth in our world in the first place; Bell thinks the Scriptures simply send us on our way to do our own thing; McLaren thinks historic faith needs to be de-reconstructed for postmoderns that the baggage of enduring truth can be dropped. [Page 87]

36. Christian Truth: *Evangelical Adventures*

Growing and vibrant churches, they say, are those that have forged their own understanding of Christ. And this is exactly what McLaren does in *Generous Orthodoxy*. This book is neither generous to those who take a more traditional Christian position, nor is it orthodox. The author has apparently no respect for those who have gone before him and who contributed the classical understandings of Christian faith. [Page 87]

37. Christian Truth: *Evangelical Adventures*

Would this not be a great time for the Western church, with its vast material and educational resources, to put itself alongside the church in other parts of the world where God is working in remarkable ways in order to learn? Could it even serve in a backup role? Is this not a time for a little humility?

38. The Truth and Life Go Together

The desire of marketers and emergents to engage the culture is commendable. Engaging it, though, is not the same thing as capitulating to it. Missionaries know the difference. They know they can adapt to local dress and blend in by learning the language and by fitting in with the accepted rhythms of daily life. They can understand the fears and hopes of those they serve without actually embracing those hopes and fears themselves. However, the day they accept the worldview of those they work among, it is time to go home. They have nothing to say anymore.

If the evangelical church does not want to lose its voice, it will have to ensure that its engagement with postmodern culture is done biblically, thoughtfully, and conscientiously.

They church must remember two points in particular: first, that Christianity is about truth, and second, that those who say they are Christians must model this truth by their integrity. A world without truth, postmoderns know, is an empty and dangerous place. And in a world full of hype and spin, manipulation and posturing, personal integrity is like a precious jewel. Even a little integrity goes so much further than all the technology, the country-club churches, and the big performers that can be mustered in the propagation of the biblical gospel. [Page 92]

39. A Better Way Forward: *One Truth*

If the postmodern world is going to be engaged successfully, it will have to be at this point. A soft, shapeless Christianity ready to adapt to any worldview may enjoy initial success, but it will soon be overtaken and lose its interest. The problem with all such adaptations is that those outside the faith soon see that they can reap Christian benefits on purely secular grounds without paying whatever small price is being asked for the adapted version of this faith.

Christian truth simply is not amendable to adaptation. It requires application, but that is an entirely different matter. Apostolic Christianity was doctrinally shaped. The churches were instructed to guard and preserve that teaching.

This apostolic framework of belief is not something that many in the contemporary church want out in the open. So they hide it. The first Christians guarded it. We venture far beyond it. They treasured it and lived within it. We think it will get in the way of our church's success. They thought that without it, front and center, there could be no church. They were right and we are wrong. [Pages 94-95]

CHAPTER 4. God

40. The Lost Center: *Sin*

The short answer, then, to the question why life has lost its center has a beguiling simplicity to it. The center has not been lost. It has only been lost to our view. And that is because our disposition, the orientation of our nature from birth, leads us inexorably to replace God with our own selves, to substitute our interests for his, and to redefine life around its new substitute center in ourselves. [Page 104]

41. The Inside God: *What Does Nearness Mean?*

God is not only near to us and related to us through creation and his preservation of it, but he also rules over all of life, guides it to the end he has in mind for it, and holds all people accountable for their lives. The fact that he has in mind nations other than

Israel came into view only later in the Old Testament, but it is unmistakably there. We need look no further than Isaiah's vision, which makes the point, against its pagan backdrop in which gods and goddesses all had local and small-sphere rule, that the creator God's power is universal. This is seen in creation (Isa. 40:15-20) itself, in his sovereign rule over the nations (40:22-26), and in individual life (40:21-26). The nations may puff and bluff, swagger and threaten, oppress and destroy, but they "are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness" (40:17). [Page 122]

42. The Outside God: *God as Holy*

His apparent absence from our lives, then, may not be a sign of his judgment. It may simply be an indication that his ways are beyond us, that he has not felt obliged to explain himself to us in every detail. This is often baffling, especially to those in moments of deep suffering. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?" asked the pained psalmist. "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). And the book of Job is chronicle of one man's deep and excruciating wrestling with the fact that God seemed both silent and absent.

He is, however, neither silent nor absent. His silence has been broken by his revelation in Scripture, which culminated in the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. He is not silent and has indeed spoken. What he has given in the pages of Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is everything that the church needs for its instruction, nurture, and life in this fallen world. Nor can it ever be said that he is absent to those in Christ whom he is bound, by oath and by covenant, for all eternity. This is the truth. It is our experience that says otherwise, partly because we struggle with sin in our own selves, and partly because God has not explained everything to us that we might like to know about his dealings with the church and with the fallen world. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God," we are reminded, "but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). [Page 126]

43. And so...?: *There Is a Cross*

Third, without the holiness of God the cross would be emptied of all meaning. Christ was not a social reformer, or a do-gooder for whom things got out of hand. These are the old liberal ideas, but they are not biblical thoughts. The cross was not an accident. It was planned in eternity, and it was for this, Jesus said, that he had come. He had come to die. And in his moment of death the holiness of God and our sin collided. This is what called forth his cry of dereliction. It is an impertinence, at the very least, to say, as Steve Chalke and Alan Mann do in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, that this view makes God guilty of "cosmic child abuse," that the cross needs to be purified of its violent images. This may appeal to a postmodern constituency, and to its Arminian counterpart, but it is remote from the way the Bible thinks about Christ's death and distant from the way the church, own through the ages, has thought about it. The truth

is that Christ's death is simply incomprehensible if we do not start with the demands of God's holiness, which cannot tolerate sin's violations.

Without the holiness of God, then, there is no cross. Without the cross there is no gospel. Without the gospel there is no Christianity. Without Christianity there is no church. And without echoes of the holiness of God in those who are Christ's, there is no recognizable church. What is it about this chain of connections that the evangelical church today is not understanding that is leading it to soft-pedal, overlook, or ignore the holiness of God?

Let me now say this positively. What we see at the cross is the white-hot revelation of the character of God, of his love providing the price that his holiness requires. The cross was his means of redeeming lost sinners and reconciling them to himself, but it was also a profound disclosure of his mercy. It is, in Paul's words, an "inexpressible gift" that leads us to wonder and worship, to praise and adore the God who has given himself to us in this way. This is what has led people to give themselves away, too, to give of themselves in service to others, to go to the mission field. IT is what has impelled Christian believers to give of their substance, and to reach out in acts of mercy to those who need it, and in acts of courage against the injustices in society. [Page 129]

CHAPTER 5. *Self*

44. Virtues to Values: *Values*

This loss of moral character has become so large an issue in our nation that many business schools and medical schools have hurriedly had to reintroduce courses in ethics. However, courses in ethics, even if well taught, are but Band-Aids to those who, in their inner lives, no longer inhabit a moral universe. And that is where the vast number of people in the West are. They have vacated that older moral world. The great majority, two-thirds, say they do not believe in moral absolutes, that moral decisions are a matter of negotiation in each given set of circumstances. [Page 146]

45. Character to Personality: *Self Marketing*

Dale Carnegie wrote his *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1935, and it became the most widely purchased nonfiction book of the twentieth century. When Carnegie died in 1955, he had become the leading figure in the world of personality cultivation. He was on the front end of what has become a massive, diversified, and flourishing self-help literature. All Carnegie did, though, was transform the tricks salesmen used on the road into techniques for selling ourselves. But along the way, more momentous things had happened. The cultivation of the good life had now been replaced by the cultivation of the self, with the result that today we think happiness has nothing to do whatsoever with our moral character. [Page 149]

46. Character to Personality: *The Commerce of Images*

This has carried over into some of our marketing megachurches and more generally into how churches look at their pastors. Especially in megachurches of the seeker-sensitive kind, the pastor is preeminently a personality on the big screen up front, a performer, who seems to close to everyone in the church but in fact is quite remote in most cases. The personality profiles of many of these pastors show them to be loners. The heavy lifting of the day-to-day pastoral care of the church therefore falls to a circle of trusted assistants. How every different this is from the older model, in which the pastor was not so much a performer as a shepherd who knew the flock and whose relations with the people in the church were the very means of fulfilling pastoral calling. To have been solely a performer in the pulpit would have spelled disaster. [Page 150]

47. Nature to Self: *Rights*

This infatuation with our own rights is one of the lines pursued in Charles Sykes's *A Nation of Victims*. He illustrates this with the case of the man who belonged to the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. It bills itself as a "human rights" organization. In Chicago one of its members brought a suit against McDonald's because he could not quite fit into one of its seats. His argument was that since 20 percent of Americans are seriously obese, at least 20 percent of the tables in McDonald's should be designed to accommodate those with large girths. It is their right. The case may seem absurd, but this kind of story is being repeated all over America every day.

As the sense of responsibility for personal behavior has shrunk, the need for litigation has increased. America has more lawyers than the rest of the world combined. In his famous Harvard address, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn observed that it is a terrible thing to live in a country, like the former Soviet Union, where there are no laws. But, he went on to say, it is also a terrible thing to live in a country where there are only lawyers. That is what we have in America. Only lawyers. [Page 159]

48. A Different Universe

It is a curious thing that the evangelical church in the West has been willing to follow the self movement down this path so uncritically. The self movement, after all, is the very symbol of our collective emptiness and insecurity. Only the hungry, after all, are always thinking about food. Those who are not deprived think about other things. Only the unhappy are constantly preoccupied with happiness, only those haunted by their own self-emptiness are always searching for something to fill the self. Redefining evangelicalism in terms of the self, in terms of the self having spiritual experiences, finding itself, satisfying itself, fulfilling itself, has everything to do with culture and nothing to do with Christ. [Page 166]

49. A Different Universe: *Where We Stand*

A renewed Protestantism, one that looks like it has in its high moments in the past, will have about it a joyous sense of knowing God, of knowing him through his Son, of being able to live in his world on his terms of his truth, but they are also the terms of fullness, of a growing completeness, of wisdom, and of life. It will be sinewy and tough. It will not cave in intellectually to all the fads and rackets of our time. It will have an infectious joy in doing what is right. There will be a sense of awe in God's creation presence, of gratitude in being able to serve him in all the callings he gives. And here some of the things that have been torn apart by life and by its disarray will begin to be put back together. [Page 174]

CHAPTER 6. *Christ*

50. Christian and Pagan Paths

This life-and-death struggle was therefore won, for the moment, by upholding the New Testament's doctrines of incarnation, grace, atonement, and resurrection. However, this message was soon lost in the Middle Ages. Luther in the sixteenth century, followed by Calvin and the other Reformers, once again returned to Scripture and once again resounded the notes of God's underserved grace, coming from above, which alone enables sinners to know him. Christianity is not about sinners lifting themselves up to God but about God coming down in condescension and grace to them. [Page 177]

51. From Above: *Above but Incarnate – Christ's Descent*

This discussion had been heard in the many things Jesus said about the coming of the kingdom. The kingdom of God, in the Gospels, is never a realm. It is a rule. And it is the rule of *God*. The primary idea in this language is that God himself has begun to rule. It is present, but this reign still has to be concluded and consummated at some point in the future.

Let us not miss an important point here. It is that this reign, this rule, is something God is doing. The reason, clearly, is that this is not something that emerges from "below," which we ourselves can get going. It must come from "above." We cannot bring it about; only God can.

We can search for the kingdom of God, pray for it, and look for it, for example, but only God can bring it about (Luke 12:31; 23:51; Matt. 6:10, 33). The kingdom is God's to give and to take away. It is our only to enter and accept (Matt. 21:43; Luke 12:32). We can inherit it, possess it, or refuse to enter it, but it is not ours to build and we can never destroy it (Matt. 25:34; Luke 10:11). We can work for the kingdom, but we can never act upon it. We can preach it, but it is God's to establish (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9; 12:32).

God's inbreaking, saving, vanquishing rule is his from first to last. It has no human analogues, no duplicates, no parallels, and no surrogates. It allows of no human synergism. The inbreaking of the "age to come" into our world is accomplished by God alone. This is all about the spirituality that is from "above" and not at all about that which is from "below." It is about God reaching down in grace and doing for sinner what they cannot do for themselves. For if this is God's kingdom, his rule, the sphere of his sovereignty, then it is not for us to take or to establish. We receive, we do not take; we enter, but we do not seize. We come as subjects in his kingdom, not as sovereigns in our own. [Page 196]

52. From Above: *Above and Reigning – In Christ Alone*

It is impossible to understand Paul's doctrine of penal substitution without placing it in the center of the matrix of God's character. God is simultaneously the God of love and of wrath – the one side cannot be surrendered to the other – and in his wrath he judges justly and in his love he himself bears the penalty of his judgment. Paul picks up this theme early on in Romans where he introduces the reader to the "righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26). This much-debated phrase, which opened up the gospel for Luther, speaks of this righteousness as God's saving intervention made known in "the gospel" and "apart from law." It is therefore what constitutes a person's standing before God. It reveals God as being right in condemning sinners and in fulfilling his promises to provide salvation. The primary reference is not to his righteous character, although his righteous character is revealed in his actions of both judging and saving (cf. Judge. 5:11; 1 Sam. 12:7; Ps. 103:6; Dan. 9:16). These acts bring Israel salvation and her enemies judgment (Isa. 45:8, 23-24; 51:6, 8; Pss. 71:19; 96:13; 98:9).

When Paul adapts this language, he does so in the interests of declaring that outside of Christ God is really angry with sinners, alienated from them by their sin, irreconcilably opposed to them in their sin. Inside of Christ, the love of God is seen and known in all the richness of its splendor and believers are covered in that righteousness in which alone they can stand before him. God is the God of wrath and love, judgment and mercy, and each of these is simply another facet of his holiness.

However, I believe that it would be more felicitous to say that Christ took upon himself the penalty of our sin than to say that he was punished for sin. His work on the cross was one in which Father and Son were united in the common task of saving lost sinners, and what Christ bore without any sense of personal desert (2 Cor. 5:21). He willingly bowed under the weight of a judgment whose justness he accepted. And thus it is that at the cross, God's triumphant and changeless grace is exhibited in space and time, his holiness is revealed through the necessity of the cross, and in that revelation is also seen the sinfulness of sin. This revelation, as well as that of God's holiness, shows us the length, breadth, and height of his love. Christ did not simply establish in his atonement the possibility or the hope of redemption from the righteous wrath of God. He accomplished that redemption. [Pages 200-201]

53. From Above: *Does This Preach?*

Whatever merit there is in stressing that postmoderns place great part of a community, none of these things can substitute for the fact that the church has to *proclaim* the truth about Christ, that it cannot do so without using words, that words are the tools for expressing our thoughts, and that our thoughts must correspond to the reality of what God has done in Christ. [Page 203]

54. From Above: *Christ's Rule Now*

The only future there actually is, is the one established by God in Christ, the one wrought in time at the cross that alone reached into eternity. But we must receive entry into this future. We cannot seize it. It is not there to be had on our own terms. This is not our self-constructed future. It is *God's*. It comes from above, not from below.

This is why those churches that have banished pulpits or are “getting beyond” the truth question are going beyond Christianity itself. The proclamation of the New Testament is about truth, about the truth that Christ who was with the Father from all eternity entered our own time. As such he lived within it, his life, like ours, marked by days and weeks and years. He lived in virtue of his unity with the Father, living for him, living as the representative of his own people before the Father, his very words becoming the means of divine judgment and of divine grace. But in the cross and resurrection the entire spiritual order was upended, his victory reached into and across the universe, and saving grace is now personalized in him. The world with all its pleasures, power, and comfort is fading away. The pall of divine judgment hangs over it. A new order has arisen in Christ. Only in this new order can be found meaning, hope, and acceptance with God. It was truth, not private spirituality, that apostolic Christianity was about. It was Christ, not the self, who offered access into the sacred. It was Christ, with all his painful demands of obedience, not comfortable country clubs, that early Christianity was about. What God had done in space and time when the world was stood on its head was Christianity's preoccupation, not the multiplication of programs, strobe lights, and slick drama. Images we may want, entertainment we may desire, but it is the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen that is the church's truth to tell. [Page 207]

CHAPTER 7. Church

55. Trouble in the House: *Losing the Church*

God's people should not neglect “to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (Heb. 10:25). Indeed, it is striking to note that in many cases in the New Testament, God's blessing came, not simply in private moments, but when people were gathered together (e.g., Acts 2:1; 4:31; 10:44). They obviously met at their

peril, but meet they did. And it was in their company that outsiders saw the reality of God's redemption at work. [Page 215]

56. Trouble in The House: *Losing the Church*

Let us be clear. Churchless Christianity has nothing to do with biblical Christianity and everything to do with pragmatic, methodological, and reductionistic thinking. It is very remote from the biblical teaching. [Page 216]

57. Trouble in The House: *The Church's Two Sides – Visible and Invisible*

The word "church" is always used in the New Testament of people, never of buildings or bureaucratic structures. The church is made up of those believers who are gathered at a specific place for worship (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28, 35) or those who normally gather for worship at a specific place but are scattered at the time of writing (e.g., Rom. 16:4; 1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2). This is the church visible, the church that can be seen locally as it worships and witnesses.

The word "church" is also used more generally of everyone, in all ages and places, in heaven or on earth, who belongs to Christ. The writer to the Hebrews spoke of coming to "the assembly [and church] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" and to "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (Heb. 12:23). Certainly Paul, in addition to thinking of the church as the local gathering of believers, also thought it encompassed all those, in all ages, who made up Christ's body (Eph. 1:22-23). It is through the whole church, in all ages, that God's wisdom is manifested (Eph. 3:10), and he is to be glorified in the whole church (3:21; cf. 5:23-25, 27, 32) now. [Pages 218-219]

58. Trouble in The House: *The Church's Two Sides – What Is Hidden*

The reality, however, is that God's kingdom is not a human business open to our control and manipulation. God hides himself from the eyes and the powers of "this age." There is a seeming wildness about him. He is uncontrollable. He is not obliged to our schemes, our leaders, our programs, or our marketing. To know him through Christ we must die, and in our death we give up not only any claim upon his mercy but also any belief that our plans, programs, and schemes can be ways of manipulating his grace. The gospel is a message of death before it is a message of life. It is a message we live in a world that is on death row. This world will remain there until faith in Christ's justifying work swings open the prison door. And when we walk through that door, trusting not in ourselves but in Christ alone, we enter another universe. [Page 221]

59. Trouble in The House: *The Church's Two Sides – Forget Rethinking the Church*

The church is not our creation. It is not our business. We are not called upon to manage it. It is not there for us to advance our careers in it. It is not there for our own success. It is not a business. The church, in fact, was never our idea in the first place. No, it is not the church we need to rethink.

Rather, it is our thoughts about the church that need to be rethought. It is the church's faithfulness that needs to be reexamined. It is its faithfulness to who it is in Christ, its faithfulness in living out its life in the world, that should be occupying us. The church, after all, is not under our management but under God's sovereign care, and what he sees as health is very often rather different from what we imagine its health to be.

The church, let us remember, is called the "church of God" (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9). Churches are "the churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) because they are his, bought by his precious blood. Christ not only constituted the church (Matt. 16:18), but God has given us the blueprint for its life in Scripture. What we need to do, then, first and foremost, is to think God's thoughts after him, think about the church in a way that replicates his thoughts about it. We need to ask ourselves how well, or how badly, we are realizing our life in Christ in the church, how far and how well churches stand as the outposts of the kingdom of God in our particular culture. [Pages 222-223]

60. Trouble in The House: *The Church's Two Sides* – Distance and Impact
Churches that want to influence their culture are so often tempted to think that to be effective they must hide their otherworldliness and become slickly this-worldly. They think they must identify with their culture as if they knew nothing but that culture. They imagine that their chief tool, if not their only tool, of influence is friendship with their world.

Churches that actually do influence the culture – here is the paradox – distance themselves from it in their internal life. They do not offer what can already be had on secular terms in the culture. They are an alternative to it. They stand outside of its life. They stand over against it in their preoccupations, because their preoccupations are with the God of their salvation who in his holiness and grace is completely unlike anything we find in life. In life we find preoccupations that are thoroughly this-worldly. The preoccupations we should find the church arise from the knowledge of God in Christ and from his written Word. Because of this, they are necessarily "otherworldly." [Page 224]

61. Trouble in The House: *The Church's Two Sides* – Distance and Impact
The church, however, cannot be had on our terms, and to try to do so is to destroy both the church and its capacity to influence its world. To be successful it must reveal in what it says and does that it is not of this world precisely because it is the "church of God," born of his grace, and called to live out its life in accordance with his truth. And that is very different.

Where do we find the evidence of this? What does a church look like that has this character? How can we see that it knows that it is the enterprise of God and not a product of merely human engineering or interest?

The answer given at the time of the Reformation is that we can see this in the churches where the Word of God is preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is applied. But these signs, or “marks” are not infallible. One can find churches that exhibit all three that are nevertheless moribund and lifeless and may have little impact upon their culture. These marks are not foolproof. However, they are helpful in pointing to the otherworldliness of the church that, in today’s climate in the West, is fast being erased.

These three marks of the true church also do not make up a complete list. The church’s invisible nature in Christ is manifest in many other ways. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how a church that is being true to itself as God’s creation in Christ will not be one where all the fruit of the Spirit will be in evidence, flawed though we all are. There we will also see the desire to make the good news of that salvation known. We will see in practice God’s compassion for the needy, the unjustly treated, and the displaced. [Page 225]

62. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – *Sufficient*

Studies on contemporary life, whether of a demographic or psychological kind, are helpful in understanding the way life is in a (post)modern world, but these studies do not themselves give the church its agenda. At least they should not. The agenda comes from the Word of God. In the rhythms of marketing, and the pandering to generational tastes, this agenda is often being lost. The agenda, in fact, is coming from the culture, from its consumers, from the world. In these churches it is *sola cultura*, not *sola Scriptura*. Unless evangelicals recover their confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture, their claim that Scripture alone is authoritative will remain empty. It will remain a charade. [Page 227]

63. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – *Doctrine*

Jesus was a teacher. The crowds marveled at “his teaching” (Matt. 7:28; Mark 1:22). This teaching, read within and against the framework of the Old Testament, is what the apostles expanded and applied to the churches under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They gave us the doctrine by which the people of God are defined and by which they should live. To be a believer is to believe this teaching. And that is the point made by an impressive array of passages.

Sometimes, as we have seen as John Stott has also noted, this apostolic doctrine is called the “teaching” (Rom. 16:17), “the faith” (Titus 1:13; 1Tim. 3:9; Jude 3), “the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4; 3:15; 4:3), and “the deposit” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). It is called the “pattern of the sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13), “the traditions” (2 Thess. 2:15), “the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42; cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). Elsewhere it is “what we have heard” (Heb. 2:1) or what was heard “from the beginning” (1 John 2:24).

It is about this body of teaching that the apostles wrote to the early Christians. This doctrine was given by God for the instruction, moral guidance, and nurture of God's people. The apostles therefore say they are writing to "remind" the churches of this doctrine, that they are to "recall" it, to "stand firm" in it, to "follow" it, or, in Hebrews, not to "drift" from it. This, the apostles say, is what they "delivered" to the church. This is what has been "entrusted" to the church.

Christians, therefore, are those who "know" this doctrine. They "believe" it, "have" it, "hold it fast", "guard" it, and "contend earnestly" for it. That is the central and defining place it should have in the life of the church. This apostolic teaching is what should describe what all Christians believe. It should explain how they think and who they are in their very souls. It should be their identifying mark. They are the ones who "have" the apostolic teaching. They guard it, treasure it, teach it, defend it, and are nourished in their lives by its truths. [Pages 228-229]

64. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – *Preaching*

Preaching is not a conversation, a chat about some interesting ideas. It is not the moment in which postmoderns hear their own private message in the biblical words, one unique to each one who hears, and then go their own way. No! This is *God* speaking! He speaks through the stammering lips of the preacher where that preacher's mind is on the text of Scripture and his heart is in the presence of God. God, as Luther put it, loves in the preacher's mouth.

This is kind of preaching that issues a summons, which nourishes the soul, which draws the congregation in to the very presence of God so that no matter what aspect of his character, his truth, his working in this world is in focus, we leave with awe, gratitude, encouragement, and sometimes rebuke. We have been in the very presence of God! That is what great preaching always does. [Page 230]

65. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – *Preaching*

Best of all is to hear sermons that arise from a biblical text and then bring that truth in to the center of life as we know it today. Unless this happens, we are only feeding into the scourge of the modern church in which Christianity lives on in our private lives but disappears from our lives in public, in the workplace.

Preaching lives between two worlds, the world of God's truth and the world we inhabit in our minds and daily life. If preaching does not bridge these two worlds effectively, the church inevitably stumbles. Where preaching negotiates these worlds, there one is likely to find spiritual authenticity. [Page 233]

66. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – *Sacraments*

The principle at stake is that salvation is to be found in Christ *alone*, by grace *alone*, and through faith *alone*. Indeed, whatever is added to the work of Christ actually takes

away from it, as J.I. Packer has argued. To say that our justification is not complete until we have added our works – as Catholics said then and as the Protestant New Perspective says now – is also to say that Christ’s work on the cross was incomplete, and remains so until we ourselves produce that completion. To say that Mary should be added to Christ’s work in fact detracts from it. Only when we see Christ doing for us what we cannot in any way do for ourselves are we able to see that all the glory belongs to God for this and none comes to us. [Page 231]

67. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – Sacraments

The sacraments can never be a substitute for the biblical gospel. That is the point. They cannot become an alternative to the gospel – as they had in Catholicism and have in subsequent Anglo-Catholicism – as if there were a different way of receiving forgiveness from God than trusting in the saving work of Christ alone. They sacraments undoubtedly point to this. 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. No wonder understanding all of this in a biblical way, and not confusing it with an ecclesiastical notion of how we find God’s saving grace through the sacraments, is a mark of the true church! [Page 234]

68. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – Sacraments

If we really want to be biblical in a careful and precise way, we will not think so much of the decision we make for Christ as of the decision God made for us in Christ. And we will not think that Christ merely dies for us because, as Paul says, sometimes “for a good person one would dare even to die” (Rom. 5:7). Indeed, in acts of heroism during times of war this happens quite often. Christ’s death, however, was not simply an act of selfless heroism. It was a substitutionary death. The New Testament language is clear and insistent, as we have seen. He not only died, but he died in our place, for our sins: he gave himself “for our sins” (Gal. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:3). he “bore our sins” (1 Pet. 2:24), he was “delivered up for our trespasses” (Rom. 4:25), he “bore our sins in his body” (1 Pet. 2:24), he is the propitiation “for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10), and we are now “justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9). [Pages 235-236]

69. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God* – Sacraments

If we mute the biblical gospel by our misunderstanding, or by our practice in the church, we destroy the possibility of spiritual authenticity in the church. In theory, most evangelicals assent to all of this. In practice, many evangelicals – especially those of a marketing and emergent kind – are walking away from the hard edges of these truths in an effort to make the gospel easy to swallow, quick to sell, and generationally appealing. They are very well aware of a deep cultural hunger for spirituality in the West, and they are trolling in these waters. The problem, however, is that this spirituality is highly privatized, highly individualistic, self-centered, and hostile to doctrine because it is always hostile to Christian truth. Evangelicals gain nothing by merely attracting to their churches postmoderns who are yearning for what is spiritual

if, in catering to this, the gospel is diluted, made easy, and the edges get rounded off. The degree to which evangelicals are doing this is the degree to which they are invalidating themselves and prostituting the church. [Page 237]

70. Marks of Authenticity: *Word of God – Discipline*

The fact is, though, that discipline is enjoined on all churches who wish to think of themselves as being in the New Testament mold. The seriously unrepentant are to be sunned (Matt. 18:15-19), the creators of dissension are to be avoided (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10), the immoral “removed” or excommunicated (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 11) and the idle admonished (1 Thess. 5:14). The church is to be cleansed of false teachers (1 Cor. 5:6-7; Rev. 2:2), and those who persist in sin are to be rebuked (1 Tim. 5:20; cf. Titus 1:13). Clearly, there is a wide range of possible circumstances in which we can put the name of Christ and the reputation of the church at risk. That being so, there is a wide range of possible circumstances in which we can put the name of Christ and the reputation of the church at risk. That being so, there is no one form of discipline. Discipline included private rebukes, reaching for the purpose of correction, and what we might now think of as excommunication.

It would be foolish to suppose that the purpose of these disciplinary measures is to purge from the life of the local church all that makes it less than a “pure” church. The truth is, as long as there are sinners in the church, it will never be pure. It will never be pure this side of heaven. And, further, it is the Holy Spirit’s work, applying the saving death of Christ, that actually brings about purity in thought, word, and deed. We can exhort one another to this end.

However, when we are joined to Christ by faith, we are no longer our own. We now bear the name of Christ. It is his name that is besmirched by our actions. The principal purpose of discipline is to restore the name of Christ among his people and the world. But there is more to it than this. [Page 238]

71. Into the Depths

These three marks of the true church, [Word of God, sacraments, discipline,] the signs of its authenticity, seek to verify whether the truth God has given the church is being preached, the gospel is being proclaimed, and the moral character and reputation of the church are being protected. However, each of these comes back to God. The test is whether the truth being preached is God’s, the gospel being proclaimed is God’s, and the holiness being sought is God’s. An authentic church is one that is God-centered in its thought and God-honoring in its proclamation and life. It can be authentic only when it honors, reflects, and proclaims who God is and what he has done in Christ. These marks of an authentic church are asking deep but unavoidable questions. Are we preoccupied with God as he has revealed himself to us, with Christ as he has been given to us, and with ourselves, not simply as psychological selves, but as God’s people in this

world? These tests, in fact, take us to the very depths of who God is and test the church at the deepest level of its being. [Page 242]

72. Into the Depths: *Who Builds the Church?*

Paul's perspective on this matter is summed up in a few pointed words. How should we think of ourselves? The answer is as "*God's fellow workers*" (3:9; in Paul's Greek, the word "God" is placed first for emphasis). How should we think of the church? It is "*God's field*" and "*God's building*" (3:9). And why should we think of it as God's field and building? Because the church is his creation and only he can grow it. He gives it its qualitative growth outwardly in terms of numerical expansion. We see this second truth at work in the early days of the church's life when we read that "*the Lord* added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47, italics mine). All this being true, it is the Lord who "assigns" the work in the church (1 Cor. 3:5), Paul says, to bring about its growth, nurturing, and training. The church's goals and functions, therefore, are *given* to it. They come, not from business manuals, not from cultural norms, and not from marketing savvy, but from what the Lord has told us in the Scriptures. It is in the light of these truths that we will be judged (1 Cor. 3:8). And this leads Paul to the heart of the matter. We sow and water, but it is *God* who gives the growth (3:6-7). [Page 243]

73. Into the Depths: *Who Builds the Church? – God Is Sovereign*

The truth is that there is nothing in our postmodern world that is a serious threat, or an insurmountable obstacle, to the will of God. This is true of his saving will as well. He is as sovereign in the way he begets faith today as he is over the sparrow that flies or falls. He will grow the church. Today, we no longer seem to believe this, and want to aid his cause by our weak and foolish capitulations. [Page 244]

74. Into the Depths: *Who Builds the Church? – Let God Be God over the Church*

Letting God be God over his church, seeing him as its center and glory, its source and its life, is a truly liberating experience. It liberates us from thinking that we have to do, in ourselves, what we are entirely incapable of doing. That is, growing the church. We cannot do the work that only God can do. We can work in the church, preach and teach, spread the gospel, encourage and urge each other on, but we cannot impart new life. Nor can we ever sanctify the church. Indeed, we cannot even feed the church. It is God who supplies the food; we are simply called upon to serve it (1 Cor. 3:5). This, however, is precisely why Paul says, a little later, that "we do not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1, 16) but are "confident" (3:4; cf. 5:6)