

No Place for Truth

Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?

By David F. Wells¹

Summaries and comments in blue by William H. Gross www.onthewing.org 2004.

Summaries of the text, and the book's page numbers, are contained in [brackets].

From an Agrarian to an Industrial Society

We have moved from a personal world in the 18th and 19th century grounded in agriculture, bonded by community, with a sense of purpose, history, place, and continuity to an impersonal world grounded in mass media, sharing only media experiences, with no sense of purpose, history, place, or continuity. The center of the town has moved from the church, to the town hall, to the TV.

This is experience without community. It is the experience of mankind in the mass, bereft of the forces that once drew it into centers of human fraternity and organization. From the impersonal mass, small groups fly off and fashion their own small worlds... They are rebels, Christopher Lasch argues, whose cultural amnesia deprives them of the one thing they want most: the experience of being able to revolt. In these ad hoc cultural protuberances there is nothing to revolt against; there is only the contemporary moment dislocated from the past and the future and stripped of parents, community, values, and beliefs...

Life in the past followed the rhythms of the seasons; ...now it does not have to, for we have heat in winter and air conditioning in summer. Then, fresh meat could be purchased only when the local butcher made it available, and fresh fruits and vegetables were available only during the local season; now every variety of food is available in every season in endless variety. Then, there were visual boundaries between the inside of a house and what was outside, between one town and another. Now, glass and plastics blur the boundary between interior and exterior landscapes, and travel and communications link one town seamlessly with another.

As these many distinctions have fallen, the stream of information, the succession of new environments, and the number of new experiences have accelerated to the point sometimes of becoming unbearable. Our experience is now universal, not local. It is broad, not deep. It is multifaceted, not focused. It is boundless, not personal.” [pp. 50-51]

[There is a historical divide between 1850 and 1950]. On the other side of the divide, Europe was the center politically and economically. On our side of the divide, the center is in America... Judeo-Christian values were central to Western Culture, even if they were not always believed personally. On our side of the divide, such values have been dislodged and replaced with a loose set of psychological attitudes that we now know as modernity.

A new civilization is, in fact, arising, and these changes are the markers along the road to its ascendancy. Unlike the kingdoms and empires of the past, it is not centered in a particular people or rooted in a particular place on earth. It is not political in nature. The soil in which this civilization flourishes is that which democracy and capitalism produce, to be sure, and it depends for survival on technology and urbanization. But where these are present, it is able to transcend boundaries and place, languages and customs, for it is carried by democracy and capitalism,

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technology and cities, and these are all rapidly becoming universal phenomena. These are the Esperanto of the modern world, the language that belongs to everyone because it belongs to no one in particular.” [p.54]

Impact of the Age of Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment and the Age of Reason seemed like they would free us from the restraints of unenlightened and unreasoning despotism imposed on us by an institutionalized church and an unresponsive government.

The real outcome of the Enlightenment, however, has not been the preservation of noble values but their collapse into complete relativism. The proud and erect shaper of life [man] first remakes reality and then finds that what has been remade has no existence outside his or her private consciousness. Not only that, but it now begins to look as though this world, at first filled with such exhilarating freedom, has lost all of its benign good intent. There is violence on the earth. The liberated search only for power. Industry despoils the earth. The powerful ride roughshod over the weak. The poor are left to die on street grates. The unborn are killed before they can ever see the rich and beautiful world that God has made. The elderly are encouraged to get on with the business of dying so that we might take their places...

Although the brazen promises of the Enlightenment about the possibility of remaking all of life are now dead, the premise on which they were built – freedom from God, freedom from authority, freedom from the past, freedom from evil – simply refuses to die... Why are these dreams so resistant to the facts? [Evolution, fascism, Marxism, Freudian psychology, positivism in philosophy, Protestant and Catholic modernists, and even Victorian piety are] sustained by the thought that every day, in every way, things were getting better and better. Two world wars should have doused the fires of those foolish illusions, but illusions have a way of making short work of reality. [pp. 58-59]

The Enlightenment, which produced political changes of large and sometimes devastating magnitude, was launched by philosophers. This was time in which ideas counted. In Our Time they do not. What shapes the modern world is not powerful minds but powerful forces, not philosophy but urbanization, capitalism, and technology. As the older quest for truth has collapsed, intellectual life has increasingly become little more than a gloss on the processes of modernization. Intellectuals merely serve as mirrors, reflecting what is taking place in society.

[The anti-modernisms of a century ago have become the means of transcending post-modernism: the simple life of camping and gentry farms, quaint mind cures like developing a positive mental attitude, revival of arts and crafts (ala Martha Stewart and the Yankee Workshop), the quest for the self in endless self-help books, and the search for authentic experience (white-water rafting and hang-gliding). They all result in] the same disillusionment, the same sense of betrayal. [p.61]

Private versus Public Life

The external culture... lost its capacity to transmit either values or meaning, and hence it lost its power to regulate behavior... The internal world was becoming more and more insubstantial. The anchorage... disappeared... The self, now left completely to itself, cut off from God and from the outside world, began to disappear. Once severed from the larger frameworks of meaning, people became increasingly introspective, and what they gazed upon looked increasingly weightless.

As religion and personal morality both became more problematic, depression became more widespread... At about the same time [1880's], cults of violence both benign (e.g. the martial arts) and malignant gained popularity. As the society became more fluid and unstable, the need for controls mounted; as these controls grew burdensome, there were some who longed for regeneration of society and saw violence as the way to attain it... [Adventure stories and fantasy became popular, turning into movies and television in our own time]. [pp.62-63]

- The recoil against modernity in our culture expresses itself as an *embrace* of modernity, ...
- the eerie sense that the self is disappearing expresses itself as the bright hope that it is being recovered, ...
- anger over life's emptiness expresses itself as joy in its abundance, ...
- fear over life's disintegration expresses itself as confidence in its management, and ...
- the sense that life is beginning to unravel expresses itself as the assurance that it is all progressing...

The truth of the matter is that Americans are impatient with nay-sayers and are disinclined to indulge, or even to attempt to understand, those who think that the basis for such hope might be gone. It is not merely that that Americans typically think that such arguments are wrong; more importantly, they think that these arguments are *offensive*. They violate an important tenet of the cultural creed – namely, that there is always hope because things are always improving, despite the fact that under secular auspices there is not truth by which one can judge whether a culture is moving forward or backward. [p.67]

In the Third World, cities are not always places of significant industry and commerce; they are much more commonly gathering places for refugees, for the displaced, for exiles, and especially for the young and poor. Today there is not a single Third World city in which the median age of the inhabitants is over twenty. Moreover, 85 percent of the residents of these cities fall below the poverty line, as compared with 18 percent of the residents in cities of the industrialized countries.

In the West, the cities are not so much homes to the people as they are centers to which they commute for various purposes, principally to work. It is in the cities of the West, constructed as they are to meet the demands of the capitalistic machine, that the values of modernity principally arise. In this context, the term modernity refers to the public environment created largely by urbanization, the moral etiquette, style of thought, and relationships of which are shaped by the large, impersonal structures that fill it.

This reorganization of society sunders public from private life, creating two spheres in which different values operate; this places a strain on us to be amphibious, to learn to move smoothly from one world to the other each day. The one world is defined by personal relations, and the other by functions within the capitalistic machine. The one is made up of the small insulated islands that are created by home, family, and personal friends, and the other by the interconnected functions of a mammoth system of production and distribution of goods and services in which individuals are important not for who they are or even for the values and beliefs they hold but for what they *do*. In this public world, personal relations may actually become impediments; success in this world may well depend on one's capacity to be impersonal if the efficiency of the business or enterprise requires it. [p.74]

Secularization of the Public Square

[Secularization is removing the church and its beliefs from the public square. The culture is building itself using values that are no longer based on] a transcendent order. There are no ... religious assumptions beneath our culture, and this is the first time any major civilization has attempted to build itself in this way... It finds its justification, its life, and its direction only from itself... There is no core of values that is accorded wide assent or commonly invoked in order to regulate the competing interests that jostle one another...

Neuhaus is ... concerned that the new vacuum in the public square may be pushing us ever closer to the dangers of either anarchy or totalitarianism, mindless chaos or mind-chilling control. The knife-edge between chaos and control is where democracy flourishes, but democracy without a common core of values... has yet to be tried. It is this vacuum... that has opened the way for... pluralism.

In society there is no longer any center of values that exerts a centripetal force on our collective life, and in religion the theological center that once held together thought and practice, private and public, has likewise disappeared. [We are seeing the rise of social fractures instead of social factions. These are sub-worlds, islands of individuals with like interests who share a world linked by customized magazines, ham-radio, and 200 channels of cable TV. The new promise is that we can get internet services and cable to meet our special interests instead of being subjected to 'mass' media. See only what you want to see, hear only what you want to hear, read only what you want to read – with no common thread to anyone outside your private world.] [pp. 79-83]

The three tendons [of society] have thus been reduced. Tradition and authority have been severed; only power remains. It is power alone that must direct our corporate life, power severed from a moral order that might contain and correct it and from the values that might inform it... In the absence of moral obligation and a sense of what is right, disputes are extraordinarily difficult to resolve, and so the set of rules that has emerged under the law must take on duties that were once shouldered by a variety of other institutions --- the family, the schools, the church. Now we are left only with the lawyers. [p.85]

Losing Our Confessional Foundation

The question naturally arises, what happened to the church's hold on tradition and authority? Wells suggests that once we abandoned theology in favor of a social gospel, or community-based activities, we became just another voice in the crowd, just another source for community activities. We chose consumer-based marketing because that is the mindset of our current society. How and when did we abandon theology? It happened when we chose to grow our churches without a confessional foundation, hoping not to offend or challenge anyone. After all, theology is divisive and we want to build bridges. Bridges are fine, but what are we inviting them to cross over to?

When the word *theology* is used in the church, it is commonly used simply of someone's private theory about some subject... By contrast, in the academy the word theology is sometimes used to describe a discipline similar in kind to history and astronomy, in which the practitioner of learning ought ideally to have no personal involvement. Alternatively, it is also used in the academy as a synonym for Old Testament study, New Testament study, or the study of spirituality, in which case it has lost its status as an independent discipline altogether.

It is my contention that theology should mean the same thing regardless of whether it is used in the Church or in the academy... In the past, the doing of theology encompassed three essential aspects in both the Church and the academy: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements. [p. 98]

- **Confession**, in this understanding, is what the Church believes. It is what crystallizes into doctrine. And, to be more specific, churches with roots in the Protestant Reformation confess the truth that God has given the Church through the inspired Word of God... Confession must be at the center of every theology that wants to be seen as... the knowledge of God, a knowledge given in and for the people of God.
- **Reflection** involves the intellectual struggle to understand what it means to be the recipient of God's Word in this present world. It has to proceed down three distinct avenues.
 - First**, it must [be comprehensive and systematic in its understanding of God's Word and his plan].
 - Second**, [it must be duplicative, passing on what it has received to a new generation of believers - nothing more, nothing less].
 - Third**, [it must be resistant to the normative behavior of the society in which it finds itself. We are bearers of unchanging Truth, not social chameleons.]
- **Cultivation**, the third element, involves the cultivation of those virtues that constitute a wisdom for life, the kind of wisdom in which Christian practice is built on the pillars of confession and surrounded by the scaffolding of reflection... This type of spirituality is centrally moral in its nature because God is centrally holy in his being. It sees Christian practice not primarily as a matter of technique but as a matter of truth. It refuses to disjoin practice from thought or thought from practice. Only when this kind of spirituality is present does the sort of wisdom arise by which a person comes to know how to be a Christian in any given set of circumstances. [pp. 99-100]

[When this is removed from the academy, all that remains is a philosophy "whose internal conversation is mostly incomprehensible to those who are outside it." As therapy replaces confession in the Church, all that remains is psychology. "At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self]. [p.101]

The Changing Definition of "Belief"

To be a believer, then as later, meant believing what the apostles taught. It is in this sense that apostolic succession is a New Testament truth. Believers succeed the apostles as they accept what the apostles taught. It is a succession not of ecclesiastical power as the Church of Rome teaches but of doctrine... The apostles asserted that Christ alone is the truth in the midst of a world that was more religiously diverse than any we have known in the West until relatively recently. [The answer to pluralism is not compromise, but truth.] There was a cauldron of conflicting religious claims within which the Christian movement would have remained tiny but for one fact: the first Christians knew that their faith was absolutely true, that it could brook no rivals, and so they sought no compromises. That was the kind of integrity that God, the Holy Spirit, blessed and used in the ancient world in spreading the knowledge of Christ. [This is the first generation to consider whether doctrinal confession could be discarded.]

While these items of belief are professed, they are increasingly being removed from the center of evangelical life where they defined what life was, and they are now being relegated to the periphery where their power to define what evangelical life should be is lost. It is evangelical *practice* rather than evangelical profession that [has changed]. [It isn't that we don't walk the talk; we don't talk at all. Our walk is no longer based on our theology. There is no biblical foundation for our thinking, no biblical direction for our actions. The link between our public life and private behavior has been broken by modernity. It has substituted faith in materialism, technology, and personal comfort for faith in the Truth of God. There must be a center for faith that is an alternative to what modernity is pouring into it. Without doctrinal theology, we have no defense against the onslaught of moral relativism.] [pp. 102-108]

From Doctrine to Professional Skills

John Owen complained of the same state of affairs over 300 years ago. He lamented that practice was not based on sound doctrinal theology, and therefore it was not based on *saving* faith. He believed that practice was the mark of a Christian, not theology. But practice was unlikely to succeed when Christ was not accurately understood in his role as our savior – our faith would be misplaced and our practice would be corrupted. Theology is the means by which we gain such an accurate understanding of justification and are driven to our knees with the knowledge of it. Knowing what Christ has done for us, we can then properly respond to the gospel with our Christian practice. “Good works are not the *cause* of our salvation, but they are the *condition* of it.” I haven't heard that sermon from a pulpit in many years.

[Seminaries have been segregated from our universities, but nonetheless they are adopting a business school mentality. Students are taught how to cultivate a career. Big salaries often go to those who are untheological or even anti-theological. They believe that they are more like doctors and lawyers in their social prestige, even though their training is far less rigorous. [Interestingly, in polls they are ranked by the public about the same as factory foremen, only 16 percent expressing confidence in their leadership. The requirements for a doctor of divinity are now about the same as what used to produce a bachelor's degree. In *Leadership* from 1980-1988, 80 percent of the material was devoted to the challenges of the clergy, 13 percent to management techniques, and less than 1 percent of any of them made clear references to Scripture or theology. Today's leadership models in the world are either the psychologist or the manager. The one controls the inner world, the other the outer. Our seminaries are turning out both.] [pp. 112-115]

Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest in what the doctrines of creation, common grace, and providence once meant for Christian believers, and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ's death such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people... It is a retreat into internal privacy, into a world that need never come to terms with the unbelieving world outside. [p. 131]

The most obvious consequence of this unabashed desertion of the cognitive substance of faith is... the disappearance of conviction... for conviction always plays the spoilsport to dreams of unity. It turns out, however, that ... nothing now stands in the way of unity, but nothing impels us toward it either. [p. 132]

Our evangelical organizations have had a surge in political influence and popularity in the past 20 years, but with that has come a growing bureaucracy. Bureaucracy invariably smothers vision,

creativity, and even theology. Leadership is now substantially in the hands of the managers... Evangelicals are not driven by a theological vision. [Meaning has moved from the public realm to the private, and in the process it has been emptied of theological substance.] [p. 133]

Modern Individualism

Americans are characterized by two competing traits: individualism and conformity. We all want to be individuals, but even more, we want the *image* of being an individual. And that forces us all to look, sound, and act the same (leading to conformity). If the image of an individual (given to us by Madison Avenue) is someone who drives a Ford truck, wears Dockers, drinks Coca-Cola, lives in the suburbs, and invests on Wall Street, then all of us are to don the gear, and take up the preferences and habits of that individual. The modern trend in America is moving us from true individualism, past this conforming individualist, into a full-blown **Self Movement**. [p. 140]

What, in fact, has happened is that the stream of individualism that flows beneath the surface of American life has had to turn in on itself because of one of the inescapable consequences of modernization – alienation. This is what really differentiates the early individualism of the 18th century from its contemporary, secular expression. Today, people increasingly find that they are unable to force and hold meaningful connections in the outer world, whether in their work, their community, their family, their nation, or their past. Modernity obliges us to turn inward, to relocate the sources of our satisfaction and fulfillment from these connections in the outer world to sources within ourselves. Modernity obliges us to psychologize life, to look to states and vagaries of the self for the reality that was once external. For the most part, evangelicals have failed to see that this shift from the objective to the subjective, this new fascination with the self, is invariably inimical to biblical and historical faith. Robert Nisbet has argued that this self-absorption, which has been passed off by many as the very essence of evangelical faith, is in fact one of the most telling indications of our cultural decay. He quotes Goethe's comment that "ages which are regressive and in process of dissolution are always subjective, whereas the trend in all progressive epochs is objective." [p.142]

The Reformers, Personal Experience, and Social Equality

The Reformers insisted that God was not *savingly* known through created nature (paganism), or human nature (mysticism), or the church and its sacraments (Roman Catholicism). He is known directly by the work of the Spirit and the truth of the biblical word. The Holy Spirit internally and supernaturally creates a spiritual environment in which Scripture may be received. The only intermediary between God and the sinner is Christ himself. That unique role cannot be usurped without destroying the Christian faith. Christ is the one who removes the double **alienation** between the judgment of God and the corruption of man. "Only through Christ is God's wrath turned aside and human disaffection from God and his rule replaced by a submissive affection."

There are combined in this conception two ideas that it has proved exceedingly difficult to maintain in union: human *dignity* and human *depravity*. The Reformers argued for the possibility, based on the image of God and the Spirit's recreation of that image, of an individual knowledge of God. In this consists our dignity. Modern individualism really arises from this, from the sense that it is the individual who must decide life's ultimate questions and that neither the state nor the Church can legitimately encroach upon this preserve, though each has a God-intended role. At the same time, however, the Reformers professed a believe in human depravity, the corruption of the whole of human nature in all of its parts, which meant not only that no one can know God apart from his sovereign work of grace but also that no assertions about the

human knowledge of God are beyond criticism. The Reformers were always suspicious of the human enterprise, not least in its aspects. They maintained a deep reserve about the self, about the reliability of human reasoning... The Reformers held that human beings should be loved but, because they are sinners, they ought not to be blindly trusted. And they granted that **personal experience** is powerful because it is intense, but they insisted that we should not allow this power to delude us into thinking that experience is always right. [p. 144-145]

At the center of the Reformation gospel is a new egalitarianism. Its foundation is not self-evident natural rights [Locke; Jefferson; American Constitution] but the common and equal loss of righteousness and standing before God. No one has a claim on the grace of God, nor is anyone superior to another in society, because *all* have sinned (Rom. 3:23).

The Protestant Work Ethic

The Western view of work, from the time of Aristotle, is that the mind is superior to the body. And so the value of work is dependent on its connection to the mind. Manual work is at the bottom of the scale; mental work is at the top of the scale. This scale was, and continues to be, the yardstick by which we measure an individual's importance and significance. Marxism tried to reverse the scale. In either system, what you have defines your life, and in either system, poverty is never considered holy. The Reformers rejected both systems. They argued that work has no value in itself, whether manual or intellectual; it is only a means to an end. The issue is whether we undertake our work in such a way that it expresses our *spirituality*, not our intellect. Their refusal to view work as an end in itself, and to view it instead as a means to exhibit Christian meaning and morality, collides with secular and Marxist conceptions of work. [p. 147]

Modern individualism has emerged from emphasizing human dignity over human depravity. We have unhitched knowledge of the creation (science) from the knowledge of sin. That has dangerous ramifications because it ignores the darkness of human nature (atom bomb; cloning; abortion; euthanasia).

Liberalism, says Reinhold Niebuhr, rejects the Reformers' view of man's depravity in favor of Rousseau's view of man's inherent goodness; or in favor of the utilitarian view of man's collective selfishness ("good" is what's best for the majority); or in favor of Adam Smith's view of *laissez faire* ("good" is the unregulated pursuit of self-interest). Liberalism therefore rejects transcendent authority in God in favor of immanent authority in man. This results in an elitist view which either promotes the power of the state (Marxism and Nazism), or the value of self (Americanism). Accountability dies when the individual is accountable only to himself. Its ethic is that what's right is what feels right, or what feels good. [\[Or what societal elites tell you is right based on their intellectual assessment; being freed of any fear that they may have the same corrupt nature as those they intend to "fix," they feel perfectly justified to establish man-made law and impose it on lesser men\].](#) [p.147-148]

Our capacity to know and understand is not limited by any *natural* inability. Our access to truth is fractured by our *moral* inability. What limits us and threatens to pervert what we do know, is not our relative intellectual capacity, as Liberalism views it, but our universal depravity, our moral corruption, as the Reformers viewed it. [p. 149]

Human Nature vs. Human Consciousness

[Modernity rejects the idea that there is anything universally shared among mankind, that there is anything that might be described as human nature. Every culture is equally valid in its](#)

individualized “human nature.” Thus no judgment may be made as to its values, weighed against some universal standard. In its place we find human personality, or individual consciousness. Evangelicalism indulges in the religious version of this cultural phenomenon. Individual and private impressions, intuitions, and experiences are distinguished from what others know and experience. The truth ceases to be external and objective, and becomes internal and subjective. There is no shared experience of it. It is in the individual consciousness that a modern person is to find life’s meaning. By the 1970’s, identity had shifted from one’s nature (what did not change over time), to one’s consciousness (self-perception), to the projection of one’s public image. Image and inner life had become disengaged from each other. [p. 152]

This led to the drug culture: inner discovery through LSD and other mind-altering drugs; the deadening of our immediate connection with an external world; escape, and isolation. With this withdrawal from external reality into an inner reality, God became silent (Sartre), absent (Holderlin), or dead (Nietzsche). What we had lost of God we replaced with self. God became our internal perception of God, and not the external, objective reality of God. God became not just personal, but individual. The death of social community led to the death of religious community, the splintering of the unified Body of Christ. Without a shared understanding of God’s truth, without orthodoxy, there could be no fellowship of the Spirit (Bonhoeffer – Life Together). Individual truth precludes corporate truth and corporate fellowship. Isolation became characteristic of the Body as well as the modern world.

The drift toward self-gratification as a means of self-knowledge broke up the social units that were so important in raising children and shaping national character: the family, neighborhood, and larger community. These were the contexts in which children used to learn about life. The family is scattered geographically, nuclear families split by divorce, neighborhoods by a loose-knit, anonymous suburban life, and community by the media. We are cut off from normative precedents. But rather than emancipation from them, we have become enslaved to a different sort of external authority: the desire to be like others in the larger culture [the drive to find our place in something larger than ourselves]. This goes beyond peer pressure to an “impersonal voice” of fashion, media consensus, movie idols, and rock star images: a new kind of conformity is upon us. Now, being “other-directed” (Reisman – *The Lonely Crowd*, 1961), we are driven to share the same quality of inner experience as others. Outward conformity in language and dress follows, not because they are desirable in themselves, but because they convey coded messages that those who speak or wear the same things share the same inner sanctum of experience. An “other-directed person thinks little about career, makes few long-term commitments, seems to have no inner core of character, little conscience, and seeks approval and even affection from a surrogate family – a jury of peers. [p 157]

Once people worked to achieve tangible ends, to accomplish things. Now, such accomplishments are of far less significance than one’s “image.” Once people worked; now they manipulate. Once people sweated; now they seduce. Once people wished to be respected, to have their accomplishments recognized; now they wish to be envied, regardless of whether they are envied for anything they have actually accomplished...

The more autonomous this modern person is, the more solitary he or she will be, left without a niche in the world, without any connectedness to the past or, for that matter, to the present. Freedom, unhappily, has dislodged the human spirit; society is remote and inaccessible, “formidable in its heavy structures of organization,” says Nisbet, “meaningless from its impersonal complexity.” [pp. 158-159]

Yankelovich found that the nation has turned to a pursuit of affluence as the means by which to attain self-fulfillment. The pursuit of the self may have ended in bankruptcy, but the pursuit of wealth was meeting with more success. The search for new values is predicated on the belief that the normal routines of life, such as working at a job and raising a family, are not really what life is about. Life begins when these duties are ended and one can turn to genuine self-expression. Life is creativity, a voyage of personal discovery. [p. 160]

Television as Reality

There is a growing consensus that there is a correlation between television watching and a reduction in one's ability to solve problems, in one's level of imagination, in reading skills, and even in relating to others, not to mention its inculcation of values that are harmful through its depictions of violence, promiscuity, and the desires that advertising seeks to engender... It serves as a mirror in which modern individuals look to find themselves, and as the sole partner in conversation that the whole nation has in common. It is a focal point for the impulses of both conformity and individualism. The television imparts the security of knowing what constitutes an approved lifestyle, approved fashions, approved tastes, and approved thoughts. It is the means by which we become other-directed. [p. 163]

Culture is defined by a shared set of values. But culture is also cultural persuasion: it conveys those values to its populace. When the center of culture shifts from the values of its respected leaders, to an unaccountable source, such as TV, the centralization of cultural persuasion may destroy the very values that culture shares. It becomes far too easy to alter in a single generation the values held and passed on for millennia. This is Thomas Hobbes' leviathan unleashed. A small group of elite in control of the means of communication, or the curricula for the schools, wields unheard of power over a society. The traditional center of the culture has abdicated its control to a usurper, a new voice of authority, unelected, uncontrolled, unrestricted, and sovereign in its influence. It panders to the desires of its audience or constituency instead of leading them to a right view of life and duty. It is consumer-driven.

Whenever a culture loses its ability to require what is normative, it is dying. The quest for self is undoing both private and public life. It is evident in our schools, one purpose of which is to induct children into external culture. Our schools now decline to educate students regarding matters of right and wrong, preferring instead to preserve and explore human relations. "A teacher is less likely to insist that cheating is wrong than to ask why a cheater cheats." Moral questions disappear into speculative psychology. Consideration for others gives way to concern for one's responsibility to oneself. All external demands have collapsed, leaving only the self, and the self has proceeded to disintegrate. The moral hedges that surrounded our collective life have been trampled down. [pp.161-168]

What once was sublimated is now, in all of its raw and often violent nature, spewed forth in the name of liberty or self-expression. What once had to be private is now paraded publicly for the gallery of voyeurs. The virtues of the old privacy, such as reticence and modesty, are looked upon today as maladies. What once was unseemly is now commonplace. What was once instinct is now truth. What was once feeling is now belief. Then the best were always people of conviction; now they seldom are. Then self-control was virtue; now it is bondage... The concealment of self that was once of the essence of civility has now become a social and psychological problem to be resolved through release. [pp. 168-169]

- Reasoned discourse has largely disappeared; in a nation of plummeting literacy, language has been reduced to the lowest common denominator, to the vulgar catch phrases of youth culture; the core of values has disintegrated; the arts are degraded; the law is politicized; politics is trivialized.
- Unruly instinctual drives replace thought; the darker side of human nature destroys the nobler, leaving a trail of pornography, violence, and indifference.
- What is now in place is not an alternative belief system, but no belief system at all. It is a vacuum. The systematic hunting down of all settled conviction is the anti-cultural predicate upon which modern personality is being organized. Its essence is not right doctrine, values and behavior; its essence is the freedom to have no doctrines, no values, to be free to follow the stream of instinct that flows from the self, wherever it may lead.

Popular evangelical journals and sermons no longer favor the older ideas that happiness is properly a by-product of moral behavior rather than the object of the pursuit itself; they disavow that self is found only when it is lost. [pp.169-171]

The reshaping of the American character coincided exactly with the reshaping of evangelical faith from a predominantly Calvinistic orientation to a typically Arminian orientation, speeded up by the revivals of the 19th century. What may be justified on religious grounds is rewarded not for its religious faithfulness, but for its cultural appeal. [p. 172] [i.e. not for its doctrinal purity, but for its popularity – consumer theology]. Assurance of faith is not based on the objective truthfulness of biblical teaching, but on the efficacy of its subjective experience. Personal testimony of our experience of Christ surmounts the biblical testimony. It is not whether Christ is objectively real but whether the experience is appealing, whether it seems to have worked, and whether having it will bring one inside the group and provide a connection to others.

New Testament witness was witness to the objective truth of Christian faith, truth that had been experienced; our witness today is witness to our own faith, emphasizing that it works, not that it is true. Evangelical hymnody today has changed direction to this experience-centered focus. We demand instant access to authentic reality, painless access, guaranteed by subjective feeling, reinforced by group-engendered emotions. Reality is to be felt rather than cognitively realized. Feeling is rapid, but learning is slow. We can have divine results without having to wait, without having to think. This characterizes the charismatic movement. Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller define sin as our lack of self-esteem rather than what has shattered our relationship to God. Nearly 90 percent of what the evangelical presses put out is centered on subjects related to self, its discovery and nurture, and resolving its problems and tensions. A survey of evangelical college students revealed that 62 percent believed that realizing one's potential as a human being is as important as looking out for the interests of others. And 87 percent said they were working hard at self-improvement. In Leadership magazine, from 1980 to 1988, less than 1 percent of the articles made reference to Scripture or any theological idea. The evangelical pastor is seen in them as the CEO; in the pulpit, he is to be a psychologist whose task it is to engineer good relations and warm feelings. [pp. 173-177]

This **relational theology** is actually Liberalism. It is a *therapeutic model* of salvation that has undercut our capacity to do serious theology [p. 178]:

1. Psychologizing life cuts the nerve of evangelical identity because it assumes human nature is perfectible. This assumption is anathema to the Christian gospel. It is a humanist model (Maslow, Rogers, Fromm, and May). The biblical model asserts the reverse: the self is twisted, maladjusted in its relationship to both God and others, filled with deceit and rationalizations, lawless, and in rebellion. One must *die* to self in order to live. The humanist world is a world of empty images, not objective truth. Transplanted in the evangelical world, it becomes a gospel of health and wealth.

2. Psychologizing life undermines the desire and the capacity to think, without which theology is impossible. Reality is based on subjective feelings instead of thought. This now predominates in academia as well. The value of argument has simply disappeared. Settling questions by reasoned deliberation and debate have greatly dimmed because of the collapse of belief in truth, and the habit of listening to self. The academy has granted equal weight to each opinion. You may explore faith cognitively, philosophically, or psychologically. One is not superior to the other, because in today's academic environment it is important to allow for **diversity of thought**. It is so amicable that lending "equal validity to each search for personal authenticity" has become the sign of maturity. *It is the height of condescension to consider all points of view equally valid – because none can then be true. It is the equivalent of patting someone on the head with a dismissive smile (John Pederson SGC)*. By doing so, evangelicals believe they have "emancipated themselves from the dreadful Fundamentalist scourge of dividing at the drop of a hat." [pp. 179-182]

Theology becomes therapy... The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends [your small group]. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.

The Psychologizing of faith is destroying the Christian mind. It is destroying Christian habits of thought because it is destroying the capacity to think about life in a Christian fashion. It is as if the topsoil were being washed away, leaving the land barren and incapable of being cultivated [Lk. 13:6-9]. It can no longer sustain the bountiful harvest of being able to discern between good and evil, to think about all of life in terms of God and his purposes, to construct a way of being that accords with his Word, and to contest the norms of cultural plausibility. All of this is lost. And when people are no longer compelled by God's truth, they can be compelled by anything, the more so if it has the sheen of excitement or the lure of the novel or the illicit about it [e.g. The DaVinci Code]. The heretics of old, one suspects, would be sick with envy if they knew of the easy pickings that can now be had in the Church. [p. 183]

3. Psychologizing life guts the theological agenda because it severs interest in the outside world. The world has become so large and complex, that we are condemned by it to find our place, our meaning, in the private sphere rather than in the public sphere. We lack a significant role in society. The interior life is now everything, and social life is nothing (Rieff, Buckley). We are now pursuing the self at the price of culture; the satisfaction of the self is the immediate cause of the paralysis of culture. The self is fulfilled only by overturning cultural controls and denying community responsibilities. That is now true of the evangelical world as well. Those who want to overturn them now far outweigh those who want to preserve them. Self-seekers have no compelling motive to sustain any interest in community life. Their only interest is how to manage life's sorrows. [p. 184]

The first fruit of the Reformation gospel, *individual responsibility* before God in matters of faith and work, has become the type of individualism by which that faith is eviscerated. Work has become meaningless, and the theology by which God's activity in the world was understood has become irrelevant. [The Gospel is gutted.](#)

The powerful vision of a humanity corrupted by sin being released to stand before God in all his glory and converse with him, gripped by the magnificent certainty of its truth, is now dying. It is being edged out by the small and tawdry interest of the self in itself, the self standing in the inner counsels of its own piety, the one hand bargaining with the other. This is how our individualism has betrayed us. [p. 185]

Dictatorship of the Average – Contemporary Mass Culture

The democratic impulses of the American Revolution relocated the control and definition of what evangelical faith should be from a trained ecclesiastical elite to an untrained populace. There are gains and losses from this. There is a loss in that theology became associated with the elite, and so a bias arose against theology, and in fact against the intellect. It elevated such bias to the level of a virtue. [p. 188] [It created in the American mind an identity of *Every*person, and an amorphous category called “the people,” a group to which every American seeks membership by acquiring and maintaining the right image.](#)

Henry Steele Commager wrote that we live “in the same kind of houses, doing the same kind of work, using the same machinery, reading the same newspapers...” We all use “the same soap, eat the same breakfast food, laugh at the same radio jokes, admire the same movie stars, and digest the same magazine articles.” [p. 192] The same is true of our religiosity. The charm of what used to be America, its difference, its uniqueness, has evolved into a capacity to erase uniqueness. This psychological democratization has led to a democratization of knowledge as well. Populist tastes have now assumed the dominant place in American culture, because television has been able to purvey them so effectively and, in the process, to push other kinds of taste and ability to the cultural periphery. **Popular culture increasingly cares little for the printed word and the kind of discourse that goes with it.** [p. 197]

Only two thirds of Adult Americans can read. Sixteen percent of white adults, forty-four percent of blacks, and fifty-six percent of Hispanics are functionally illiterate. The bible is now being translated at a 4th grade level. Television is a major culprit. Those who select the programs seek the most commercially successful ones. It appeals broadly by thinning its substance, ensuring that all can find connections with it, demanding little of the viewer, and offending as few people as possible. [The same trend can be found in American politics.](#) Because of the short attention span of the audience, they are inclined to appeal to the viewer's feelings rather than their thoughts. Feelings are easily aroused; thought less so. Appealing to feelings is more egalitarian: everyone has feelings; not everyone has the ability to think and analyze. [There is a concerted push toward conformity and dumbing down, and the erasing of individual thought. Wouldn't you rather be a Pepper too?](#) This is because where the print media has flourished, individualism has flourished. [p. 201]

Viewers look for satisfaction in front of the television set, just as they do at the supermarket. “When all ideas are equal, when all religions, life-styles, and perceptions are equally valid, equally indifferent, and equally undifferentiated,” they can be given value only “by the choice of the specific individual.” (Donnelly) [p. 203] We value private decision, but our private decision finds validation only in public acceptance: individualism versus conformity. The objective has

moved to the subjective, and the ordered has moved to the fragmented. The public which used to be face to face with family, neighbors, and community, has now become the faceless and impersonal society of the media that sets our standards and provides our approval. [p. 203]

The Age of Revival – 1880's

With the Populist Party, and the populist movement of the Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, and Universalists, came leaders who were able to appeal to the masses, to recruit followers and find them together with common ideals and communications skills. They were able to encourage democratic participation by the commoners, winning the soul of America. With this movement came anti-clericalism, anti-intellectualism, and colloquial theology. It employed daring storytelling, unrestrained appeals, intentional humor, strident attacks, graphic application, and intimate personal experience. The typical sermon didn't contain theology but morality. They didn't develop the mind, but they were definitely "entertaining." Among them were Charles Finney and Dwight L. Moody. They both vigorously opposed the formal study of divinity.

In these movements, the distinction between clergy and laity was erased with its deference towards learned opinion. Leadership was redefined based on democratic assumptions. Faith was no longer based on external religious authority, but on the powerful visions of faith that seemed more authentic and self-evident. Judging correct doctrine was based on an intuitive sense of right and wrong. This ability was seen as a common right rather than a privileged inheritance [ordination to entrust the truth to those best able to preserve and promote it became *passé*]. These movements were driven by the hope that, by breaking with the past, they would introduce a new order of social and religious relations – perhaps the millennium itself.

Calvinistic orthodoxy seemed anchored in the older world of hierarchy and privileged elitism. It appeared to be undemocratic. And so it was put to flight before **Arminianism**, the theology of the common man. Hatch says that when "the commoner rose to power, people of ideas found their authority circumscribed." Never again, he says, would America produce people of the caliber of Adams, Jefferson, and Madison in the realm of politics, or of Jonathan Edwards in the realm of theology. [pp. 205-207]

What this meant, and continues to mean, is that the psychological center of much of evangelical faith contains the same two ideas that are at the heart of democracy: 1) *the audience is sovereign*, and 2) *ideas have no intrinsic value*; their only legitimacy and value is found in the marketplace, voted on by the audience. The job of the theologian changes from one who identifies and reveals truth from God's word, to a salesman, intent on persuading a fickle audience of the usefulness of his ideas to gain their vote. [p. 207] The Christian faith has become a matter for our distraction and entertainment. If we are not amused, we vote with our feet to go where we will be amused.

Democratized Faith

In a democracy, every person's vote has the same weight, regardless of how well or badly informed it is. And in a democratized faith, every person's intuitions are likewise granted equal value. To argue otherwise is thought to be elitist. It suggests that some have a better grasp of the truth, and are asserting their privilege. Common access to truth is understood to mean common *possession* of truth. If everyone's intuitions about God and life stand on the same plane, it is assumed they are all equally valid, true, and useful. It is "awkward" to suggest that the intuitions of some are true and others are not. It is considered arrogant and offensive to question the common insight of all. Just as politicians hold office only by consent of the sovereign electorate,

so Church leaders should fulfill their duties within the limits of popularly held ideas. The best pollster now makes the best leader, for all ideas must find their sanction and legitimacy in the audience; and who knows the audience better than the *pollster*? [p. 214]

Because this is not a flattering portrayal of leadership, we now refer to it as “servant leadership.” That has a ring of piety, but it is false piety, antithetical to the biblical understanding of it.

Contemporary servant leaders are typically individuals without any ideas of their own, people whose convictions shift with the popular opinion to which they assiduously attune themselves, people who bow to the wishes of “the body” from whom their direction and standing derive. They lead by holding aloft moist fingers to sense the changes in the wind. In all this, they show themselves to be different indeed from the One who embodied what servanthood was intended to be, and who never once tailored his teaching to what he judged the popular reception of it would be...

As a result, faith that appeals to reason is doomed to failure; faith that appeals to feelings, on the other hand, seems to be assured of success. “Worldliness is that system of values which in any culture has the fallen sinner at its center, which takes no account of God or his Word, and which therefore views sin as normal and righteousness as abnormal.” [p. 215]

Genuine Christian Leadership

Christian faith is not a tool for reaching some desired goal, whether psychological, sexual, economic, or racial. Christian faith is itself the goal. Genuine leadership in the Church is a matter of teaching and explaining what has not been so well grasped, where the demands of God’s truth and the habits of the culture pull in opposite directions. Genuine leadership is a matter of finding ways of reaching greater Christian faithfulness and offering greater Christian service. And the one flows from the other. There is no such thing as Christian service that is unfaithful to God and his truth. Without real leaders, God’s people are led by the pollsters.

Genuine leaders often have to be different. They often have to articulate the truth of God’s Word among those who do not fully understand its demands and implications. To clarify what people do not understand, and mobilize them to implement what they do understand, is what leadership is all about. In the evangelical world, there are many organizers and many managers, but only a very few leaders. There are only a few because there can be no leadership without a vision, and the ability to see is now in very scarce supply. And seeing is what **theology** is all about. It is about seeing the truth of God, the gap between that truth and modern society, and seeing how to practice that truth in this world. Without theology, there is no faith, no believing, and no Christian hope. [pp. 216-217]

The Seminaries and Theology

From the beginning of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century, the focus of a college education and a seminary education changed. Where it used to be seen as a means by which one might do public good, it became a platform to a career, to ascend to greater visibility or personal gain. It was less immersion in knowledge for its own sake, and more preparation for career opportunity, to find a niche in the marketplace. Once this found its way into the seminary, an anti-theological bent soon followed. It shifted the role of the minister from teacher, preacher, pastor, and administrator to counselor, manager, facilitator, and social worker. Spiritual development of the congregation became an afterthought. [pp. 218-232]

The minister's authority and professional status does not ride on his character, ability to expound on the word of God, or theological skill, but on interpersonal skills, administrative talents, and ability to organize the community. The pastoral ministry has been professionalized. It is anchored firmly in the middle class, and the attitudes of those who are themselves professionals. Acting as a marketplace, they define their leader, not God. Ministers define themselves as a product for which there is a market. The services and activities of the Church resemble those of the government and secular institutions. As a result, the Church looks and sounds like the world. [pp. 234-237]

Because only those interested in theology went to seminary, theology came to be seen as part of the specialization which defined ministers as professionals, and distinguished them from the laity. In American higher education, **generalists** were replaced by **specialists**. Eternal truths were replaced with the truths of naturalism, and moral philosophy was replaced by science. [Egalitarianism required everyone to go to college, qualified or not. And thus knowledge became an industry, big business.](#) The production, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge in the U.S. accounts for a third of its GDP. The target audiences became increasingly specialized, and esoteric. The result was to diminish the capacity of the graduates and audiences to think about their world in an interconnected way. They became technicians of narrow scope, collectors of knowledge in different fields, unable to synthesize their knowledge across those fields. [This compartmentalizing of knowledge has led to further alienation, and dependency on others to interpret and synthesize for them. That has led to further centralization, and conformity.](#) [pp. 238-241]

In the seminary, such specialization has occurred apart from a common theology that might have synthesized the knowledge imparted. Theology is no longer essential to the ministry. Since 1970, professionalization has been the expressed intention of the A.T.S., and the seminaries under its jurisdiction had to comply to remain accredited. The determination of what is to be studied is no longer grounded in theology, but in the vocation to which the student is headed. Without theology, the student is left with an arsenal of specialist's tools, but without a way to integrate them, without a unifying principle for their use. There has been a profound increase in knowledge, but a profound loss in understanding. We have allowed theology to be drained from the ministry, and we laugh at those who think theology is important. But then we are shocked to find the superficial and unbelieving in our midst. Pastors are rendered sterile through professionalism, and yet we bid them to be fruitful in their work. [p. 247]

Religious Consumerism

What we have is practical atheism. It reduces the church to nothing more than the services it offers, or the good feelings the minister can generate. Management by truth has been replaced with management by technique. Theology and practice have been disengaged from one another. **The center around which Christian thought turns has shifted from God to the Church.** The church is assaulted by religious consumers who want the Church to meet their needs, and will quickly look elsewhere if those needs are not met. These consumers are looking for the sort of thing the self-movement is offering, but in evangelical dress. A genuinely biblical and God-centered ministry is almost certain to collide head-on with their self-absorption and man-centered focus. And what price has the church paid for its pandering and populist theology? In 1966, 41 percent of those polled expressed confidence in the clergy. By 1989 it had fallen to 16 percent, lower than the government, the military, and the press. [pp. 248-256]

The Authority of the Bible

The importance of the story form in the Bible does not lie in the story form itself. Its importance lies in the fact that as a narrative of God's acts in the external world, it has yielded truth that is as objective as the events to which it is wedded. The prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT had a certainty about the existence, character, and purposes of God – a certainty about his truth – that seems to have faded in the bright light of the modern world. They were convinced that God's revelation was true, and true in an *absolute* sense. It was not merely true to *them*; it was not merely true *in their time*; it was not true *approximately*. What God had given was true universally, absolutely, and enduringly. Truth to them was not privatized. It was not synonymous with personal insight, with private intuition. It was not sought in the self at all, but in history – the history that God wrote and interpreted – and it was therefore objective, public, and authoritative. [pp. 259-264]

This was the great divide between the pagans and the prophets: the pagans thought of truth in terms of private intuition, and the prophets did not. The same divide exists today between the modern mind and biblical Christianity. To the pagan, the supernatural was known by experience rather than by detached thought.

- The pagan mind failed to make a distinction between the natural and the supernatural.
- Pagan cultures failed to distinguish between objective and subjective reality. Intuition and dreams were considered far more potent as vehicles of knowledge than reason.
- And pagans failed to distinguish between the living and the dead.

Six Characteristics of the Pagan Mind – and the Modern Mind

1. The gods were known through nature
2. Apart from nature, there was not other revelation
3. The supernatural realm was neither stable nor predictable
4. The pagan divinities were sexual
5. The pagan mind had no moral categories and made no appeal to moral absolutes
6. History had no real value for the pagans; they sought predictable cycles of regeneration

By contrast, the saving revelation of God came in *history*. The resurrection of Christ had nothing to do with the religious imagination, nothing to do with parables of existence and symbols of inner experience; it had everything to do with an act of God that was public, external, and objective. And here lies the crucial difference between the pagan and the biblical minds. The biblical authors wrote from the conviction of the uniqueness of the biblical faith – a uniqueness that was not a matter of perception but of fact, not simply of their inner experience but of the objective facts of their history. [pp. 264-270]

The Biblical Mind

1. the biblical narrative works itself out in *history*
2. the meaning of the narrative resides in its events, and yet must be supplied by God
3. the meaning of the biblical narrative cannot be fully known until it is completed, which is to say that eschatology is indispensable to its meaning. [p. 271]

The Israelites were called to remember the stream of divine activity by which God called, shaped, owned, and protected his people. It was this history out of which the first creeds were

distilled (Dt. 6:20-24; 26:5-9; Josh. 24:2-13), and it was never, therefore, simply a bare rendering of the facts. It was a rendering of their *meaning*, and it was in the conjunction of event and meaning that Israel's theology was forged, a theology that was to be laid to heart. [p. 275]

The Distinctive Story of the Bible

In the Gospels, God's kingdom has two foci – salvation and judgment. And the fact that it is Jesus who inaugurates it, thus doing the work that only God can do (God alone saves and judges), is an implicit argument for his divinity that should not be underestimated. It is by God alone that we can be saved from sin, death, and the devil; it is by God alone that we are judged. And the Gospels indicate that Christ undertakes both of these activities by way of establishing his kingdom. He saves and he judges. The first theme, salvation, is more commonly associated with his incarnation, and the second theme, judgment, with his return. It is thus that the promise to David is finally realized, thus that his greater Son comes to sit upon his throne forever. And so, as the gospel of his grace is spread, we immediately find Luke reporting that Cretans and Arabs spoke of "the wonders of God" (Acts 2:11). [p. 276]

In the OT, by the acts and word of God, Israel was freed from the pagan habit of thinking of life as endless cyclical repetition rather than movement toward a specific destination. We have a salvation history, an interpreted narrative of God's acts and redemptive purposes that is unique. It was unique in the ancient world, and it is unique in ours. It begins with three main events:

- The call of Abraham
- The deliverance from Egypt
- The establishment of David's throne

These are the most important part of the public framework within which God and his work are understood in the OT. In the NT, the incarnation, death, resurrection, and return of Christ bring each of these three OT events to final fruition. It is in Christ that we become Abraham's children, in Christ that we become God's children, in Christ that we become God's subjects. It is because of Christ that Abraham's children become as numerous as the stars, and eligible to enter the Promised Land which is now cleansed forever of all sin, suffering, and tears, and in which God's rule is so established that it will never again be contested.

The apostles preached not what was internally interesting but what was externally true. God had raised Jesus from the dead, and this was a matter of history, not simply of internal perception. The fact that God's truth was transmitted through events external to the individual meant that it was objective truth; the fact that it was objective meant that it was also public. Their faith was grounded solely on the objective and public nature of God's word. They stood alone among these ancient cultures, their faith distinctive and unique. [pp. 276-278]

The bible is not a remarkable illustration of what we have already heard within ourselves; it is a remarkable discovery of what we have not and cannot hear within ourselves. Unless we steadfastly maintain this distinction in the face of modern pressures to destroy it, we will be putting ourselves in place of the bible. It would reassert the old paganism, and preaching would degenerate into mere story-telling. [Meaning comes from the *theology* of Scripture evidenced in external events, not our personal interpretation or intuition of some internal truth.](#) [p. 279]

A Christian mind sees truth as objective. It seeks to understand reality as it is in itself, not as it seems to the subject. The Christian mind accepts God's pronouncements concerning the meaning of life as the only true measure in that regard; the modern mind rejects such revelation as the

figment of a religious imagination. Today, reality is so privatized and relativized that truth is often understood only in terms of what it means to each person. The modern mind believes that truth varies from person to person, time to time, and culture to culture just as consciousness varies across these boundaries. The Christian mind, by contrast, believes that truth does not vary and cannot be changed because it is based on external historical events. [p. 280]

It is precisely because Christian faith presents itself as objectively true that it has always exalted teaching, doctrine. The NT comes to men with definite, positive teaching; it claims to be truth; it bases religion on knowledge, distinguished by the absence of pagan feelings and intuitions. Unless truth is objective, it cannot be declared to others. The desire to know and practice God's truth is the only soil in which theology can grow. [p. 280]

Reforming Evangelicalism

Most evangelicals seem to assume that modern culture is neutral in its values, and so it does not pose the threat of alienating people from God. You either believe in the modern world, or you believe in God, in his truth, and in his Christ. The spirit that parades as unbelief in the modern world is actually belief in the modern world. [pp. 285-286]

Modern experience shapes us because it is intense and relentless. There are no more islands of solitude, no more sanctuaries to get away from the world.

We now experience directly the tidal surge of too much information, too many responsibilities, too much change, too many choices, and too many situations over which control has now slipped from our hands almost entirely, all the way from the coldness of the workplace to the pain of broken families. This turbulent surf crashes unremittingly into psyches too small and too fragile to withstand it. [p. 287]

Part of the answer then is to shut out the flood: turn off the TV, radio, CD, DVD, newspaper, computer, PDA, Internet, shortwave, cell phone, pager, telephone... Disconnect from the world for a while. It is in this frantic context that the deceptions are generated. Modernity dazes and distracts us to the point that we are willing to accept it as true reality. The modern individual begins to dismiss even the recent past as valueless; it is here that God seems increasingly remote from the urgency of internal experience, and irrelevant to what is most important in life. [p. 288]

Evangelicals now stand among those who are on easiest terms with the modern world, because they have lost their capacity for dissent. Recovery of dissent is what is most needed, and the path to its recovery is the reformation of the Church. Dissent with the world arises out of the vision of God in his otherness. Without an audience of those who know the God who stands outside the flow of modernity, theology dies as surely as art dies in the absence of art lovers.

The Church is the place where biblical knowledge must be learned, developed, and applied. The Church is the context in which God and his Word should receive the most serious thought. Theology developed apart from the Church rapidly loses its character. A theology oblivious to the Church as the people of God soon loses a sense of wonder, because it is cut off from worship. It soon loses its productive connections to the world because it is not driven by a commitment to service. It will soon lose its life and character.

The truth is, where we have emptied ourselves of theology, we have emptied ourselves of Christian seriousness in preaching, worship, piety, thought, and service. The Church's agenda shrinks to the borders of its own interests. Its criterion for success is its own success. Without theology, worshippers have no reason to look beyond themselves. The Church's failure to make

known the character, acts, will, and purposes of God, disillusion ordinary believers. What the church needs is not Finney-style revival, but reformation. [pp. 289-296]

The language of psychology has redefined the biblical terms of the Church. Divorced from the holiness of God, sin is merely self-defeating behavior, or a breach in etiquette. Our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any of a host of alternative self-help doctrines. Our public morality is reduced to private interests. Our worship becomes mere entertainment.

Faith is the recognition of God's holiness. Theology is dying because the Church has lost its capacity for it. It is a sign of creeping death. If the Church can begin to find a place for theology by refocusing itself on the centrality of God, if it can rest upon his sufficiency, if it can recover its moral fiber, then it will have something to say to a world now drowning in modernity.

[pp. 298-301]