

## **The Rejection of the Classical Doctrine of God and What It Says About the State of the Evangelical Movement**

**David F. Wells**

Post-War evangelicalism, which linked believers around the world through the *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization* and the *World Evangelical Fellowship*, which produced the *InterVarsity Fellowship*, which saw the emergence of Billy Graham to international prominence, and spawned *Christianity Today* as its public, journalistic voice, is now in a free fall, despite the fact that it is still sustaining many fine individual organizations. We are coming to the end, I believe, of this era of believing in the form that we have known it and what will follow it is now taking on a rather different shape.

### **Evangelicalism Stumbles**

In 1975, I teamed up with church historian John Woodbridge to produce *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing*. The three decades following the end of the Second World War, from 1945 to the year when our book appeared, had seen astonishing growth in the evangelical world. The older fundamentalist strictures had faded, the world was being engaged, mainline denominations were being entered, scholarship was beginning to flourish, churches were growing, new organizations were sprouting, educational institutions were emerging, and the nation began to take note. Gallup's finding that one third of the nation claimed to be spiritually reborn quickly dislodged any other contenders from the spotlight and 1976 was declared to be "the Year of the Evangelical."

When we put together this book, however, the very early signs could be seen of a Faustian bargain in the making, though at that time I had no idea that the unraveling of Evangelicalism would come so quickly. At the very moment when evangelicals seemed poised to conquer the world, they were beginning to lose their soul. The astonishing outward success of printing presses in high gear, massive political coalitions forming, megachurches popping up, and a steady trail of visitors to the White House could not mask the growing emptiness that would become increasingly evident.

It needs to be said immediately that this is a minority viewpoint. George Barna reported in 1999 that 54% of Protestant pastors thought that revival was breaking out despite the fact that for every Protestant church that is started two close down and despite the fact that giving is down across the board and support for missions is sinking rapidly. Regardless of whether or not evangelicals want to see it, this emptiness is a growing reality and with this emptiness has come a loss of boundaries, both theologically and morally.

We, therefore, attempted in this book to define Evangelicalism in terms of the Reformation's formal and material principles (Scripture and justification respectively). Whatever differences there were in ecclesiology, in pneumatology or, in theological emphasis, evangelicals could not affirm less than what these two principles asserted and still retain the right to call themselves evangelical. These principles stated that the Bible is God's enduring revelation of truth and, as such, is authoritative in all matters of faith and conduct and that Christ, in his substitutionary

death on the Cross, is the only way of salvation entered into by grace alone through faith alone. It was our hope that this theological definition of Evangelicalism would establish the terms of the discussion which we saw coming.

It is hard to know now how successful the book was. Evangelicalism had always been a patchwork quilt, parts of it, no doubt, patchier than others! Diverse though it was, however, it was held together in the early post-War years by a common doctrinal inheritance, some of which had come from fundamentalism, and some of which was the result of a carefully orchestrated attempt at recovering biblical doctrine through a remarkable networking effort between British and American scholars. Nor can we minimize the immense impact of the leaders who emerged in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's and who gave the evangelical coalition considerable coherence and direction: Billy Graham, Carl Henry, John Stott, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Jim Packer, F.F. Bruce, Harold Ockenga, Francis Schaeffer and many, many more. It was a combination of this doctrinal inheritance and the personal influence of these leaders that gave the evangelical coalition its appearance of unity. And it was *Christianity Today* that articulated the evangelical agenda.

As the influence of these leaders faded, the core doctrinal assumptions which they had cherished and articulated began to lose their vitality in the evangelical world. It was clear to us, even in 1975, that Evangelicalism was about to change, the core consensus was beginning to weaken, strategic coherence was beginning to disappear, and that in the absence of these things we could anticipate seeing many new ad hoc definitions as to what Evangelicalism was, and many new ad hoc silences when it was not what it was supposed to be. We were right. Our book turned out to be on the front end of a veritable cottage industry of definitions as to who evangelicals were and as to what they believed. But by the 1990's that debate had largely died down. For some, the older doctrinal boundaries had been crossed with astonishing ease and with few, if any, sanctions and, for others, it had become an exercise in futility to close the barn door when it was apparent that the beast had long since bolted. So while many evangelicals still doffed their hats to the formal and material principles, when it came to worshipping, structuring the church, and living in the marketplace, they quickly looked the other way. As Evangelicalism has emptied itself out theologically, novelty, experimentation and cultural trendiness have overwhelmed many of the historic, bedrock affirmations that once characterized evangelical faith.

## **The Postmodern World In The Church**

It is surely a great irony that what evangelicals have most surrendered in the hope of becoming culturally relevant is what, in fact, now makes them culturally irrelevant. This is true of each of the major defining characteristics of Evangelicalism: the revealing work of the Father, the redeeming work of the Son, and the regenerating work of the Spirit (to borrow Stott's trinitarian definition of Evangelicalism and to expand the Reformation's two principles into three). Let me explore each of these briefly.

### **Revealing Work of the Father**

First, then, is the revealing work of the Father. Post-War Evangelicalism, at least at its best, insisted on God's centrality and the authoritative functioning of his Word. It was an insistence that was made hard in the heyday of Enlightenment rationalism which dominated the twentieth

century until about the 1960's. This rationalism made it seem normal to live in the world as if God did not exist, to look to the human being as the source of all morality, mystery, and meaning, and to repudiate all external authorities, especially those of a religious kind. This spirit of disbelief pervaded the Academy, rewrote how biblical study was to be pursued, and discomforted those who believed in inspiration.

However, by about the 1960's the cultural mood began to change away from Enlightenment rationalistic certainty and toward a rebellion against all certainty, away from Enlightenment arrogance and toward postmodern despair. Now the universe was no longer seen as a closed system operating under the uniformity of cause and effect, and some scientists began to consider the possibility that there just might be a God. Now morality was no longer seen as self-evident as the Enlightenment proponents had argued; otherwise moral confusion would not be so rampant. Now progress, which was the Enlightenment's eschatology, was called into question because despite our remarkable technology and capitalism's abundant provision of goods and services, the world had become more dangerous, and the human spirit more eviscerated. And now knowledge, which the Enlightenment had seen as value-neutral, all of sudden was seen to be full of bias and corruption. In the postmodern eclipse that followed, everyone was seen as a fake, each spinning his or her "story" for some personal advantage, and all meaning ("meta-narratives" in Jean Francois Lyotard's language) collapsed. In a period of but a few years, it was decided that there was no longer any genuine truth, only truths; no principles, only preferences; no grand meaning which is outside of ourselves but only the small, passing gestures of meaning we create for ourselves; no reality outside of ourselves which we can describe by our language but only a reality which we create by our language.

This is the cultural context in which the evangelical Church finds itself at the beginning of the new millennium. It is a moment which cries out for a countercultural declaration that there is truth, that God has secured that truth in his Word, that it is this Word that he has given to the Church for its instruction, nourishment, and encouragement, and that he still intends to use this biblical truth in regeneration and sanctification. This countercultural conviction is far too rare today. For many, the world seems too complex, the Church too confused, to think that God still can accomplish his ends through this means. The Church is, therefore, awash in strategies borrowed from psychology and business that, it is hoped, will make up for the apparent insufficiency of the Word and ensure more success in this postmodern culture. Today, the issue is not so much the inerrancy of Scripture but its sufficiency, and this at the very moment when a robust confidence in its sufficiency is precisely what the Church needs to have if it is to live out its life in proclamation and service effectively.

### **Redeeming Work of the Son**

The second defining characteristic of Evangelicalism concerns the redeeming work of the Son. What Christ accomplished on the Cross, however, presupposes that we live in a moral universe, one preserved by God himself in his holiness (cf: Rom. 1:18-32). It is this universe that has evaporated in the postmodern mind, making sin incomprehensible and Christ's work unnecessary. The path to this end, I argued in my book, *Losing Our Virtue*, happened through a fourfold substitution in our culture. First, we substituted values for virtues. Virtues have always been thought of as aspects of the Good which are normative for all; values may be nothing more

than personal preferences. We treat values in a value-free way. Second, we substituted the self for human nature. Human nature was what was common to all people and in the *imago Dei* it is what distinguished humans from animals; the self, by contrast, is unique to each individual which in turn means, in our radically individualistic age, that no two people inhabit the same reality. Third, we substituted personality for character. Character was what made the practice of the virtues habitual and even unthinking; personality was, quite literally, a twentieth century creation and it had to do with how we staged ourselves for others or how we were viewed by others. In our postmodern culture which is TV-dominated, image-sensitive, and morally vacuous, personality is everything and character is increasingly irrelevant. Finally, we substituted shame for guilt. Shame has become a horizontal word. It is the embarrassment we feel when someone sees us as we are or in a context we wanted kept private. It is a condition for which there are psychological remedies and the ultimate liberation is to become completely shameless. Guilt, by contrast, is a vertical word. It is the siren of our moral nature. It is what lines up who we are and what we have done with moral law and the holiness of God.

It is now all too apparent that these substitutions have intruded into the Church as well. And we can say with certainty that if these substitutions are not reversed, we will not recover our understanding that we are living in a moral universe, nor will we see why the substitutionary death of Christ was necessary, and the doctrine of justification by which the Church stands or falls, as Martin Luther declared, will become redundant. In the evangelical church today, wherever the postmodern mood has intruded, the affirmation of the Gospel as part of a biblical worldview is diminished. It is the recovery of this worldview that the postmodern world most needs to hear and it is this that the Church seems unwilling or unable to enunciate. Without such a recovery our culture will be left to its narcissistic and nihilistic confusion and the Church will be left with nothing to say.

### **The Spirit's Supernatural Work in Regeneration**

The third defining characteristic of Evangelicalism has been its belief that without the supernatural work of the Spirit in regeneration, and without his ongoing work in sanctification and preservation, there would be no Christian faith. Ever since Gallup's finding in 1976 that one third of Americans claimed to be born again, confusion about the Holy Spirit's work has only deepened, even in the Church.

It would probably be true to say that what many people call being born again probably comes closer to *conversion*, in biblical terms, than to *regeneration*. In Scripture, conversion is the act of turning away from sin and its self-deifying attitudes, and turning toward Christ in trust. It is a conscious act, attended by regret, sorrow, pain, and coupled with a belief in Christ's saving work. It is this (or a pale facsimile of it) that most people seem to have in mind when they answer Gallup's questions. There was for them, at some point, a moment of significance, an experience that seemed like a turning point. Granted, for so many it is quite unclear what it was they turned from as well as to whom it was that they turned for this moment or experience is devoid, in many cases, of any moral dimension. This can be fairly deduced from the fact that in study after study it has become clear that those claiming to be born again do not live different moral lives afterwards from those who claim to be straightforward secularists. Nor does the experience of having been born again impact their moral vision. In one of these studies, for

example, 52% of born-againers said that President Clinton's "honesty and trustworthiness" were irrelevant to how he performed his work as President. When born-againers and secularists were compared, 11% more born-againers than secularists said that it was irrelevant whether he "keeps his promises," 14% more said that he is "a good role model" and 15% more said that "he is a good example of the Christian faith." In our culture, being born again seems to have been unhitched quite completely from moral considerations, hence from an understanding of sin, and hence from salvation in any biblical sense. It simply stands for some sense of turning from something or some meaningful moment. But if it does relate to the biblical discussion it would be closer to conversion than regeneration.

Regeneration in Scripture, in contrast to conversion, is the instantaneous, divinely wrought work of God in the soul in which spiritual life is imparted where none existed. Although the language of being born again is clearly biblical (I Pet. 1:3), more common is simply the birth image (John 1:3; I Pet. 1:23) or the language of creation (such as in Eph. 2:10). Although we are active in conversion, turning from sin to Christ, we are not active in regeneration. We do not give ourselves birth. Life is given by God. We no more give birth to ourselves in the spiritual world than we do in the natural world. We are born. We are not self-created in Christ but created in him by God.

Why is it that Scripture is so consistent in speaking of our helpless passivity in this matter? The reason we have to be regenerated by God is that by nature we are hostile to him. The fallen mind "does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot" (Rom. 8:7). We have neither the desire to reconcile ourselves to God nor the means of regenerating ourselves.

This viewpoint, however, is news today. As regeneration is confused with conversion, and as we sink ever deeper into a therapeutic universe, the biblical language of spiritual birth gives way to the psychological language of healing. The widespread assumption in our culture is that as the body contains its own healing mechanisms so, too, does the self. For regeneration to occur, we therefore simply have to tap into the springs of our own internal healing. When this happens, we think that we have had a turning experience which then shows up as a Gallup statistic. And what I have been describing in the culture is now all too evident in the evangelical Church with its endless chatter about the self, its psycho-babble, its easy gospel that asks for no repentance, its quick decisions which ask for no seriousness, its emptied-out understanding of the necessity of Christ's death, its homiletical replacement of justification by regeneration, and its shameless pursuit of Church growth at any cost. What the evangelical Church is losing is its understanding about why we have to be regenerated, divinely recreated in Christ, raised to new life by the Holy Spirit. An experience of having turned, no matter how deeply meaningful this moment may be, may have nothing at all to do with this work of God.

The fading of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism, which in turn has promoted much confusion about who and what evangelicals are, is not only about beliefs. It is also about God. It is about our knowledge of the God of the Word, the Christ of the Cross and the Spirit. And the more seriously we take the God who has revealed himself, the more firmly we grasp the redemption Christ has wrought, the more fervently we seek the Spirit's transformation, the less confidence we will have in ourselves. It is this loss of confidence in ourselves that is the bedrock condition for a growing confidence in God.

This confidence in him will enable us to understand the fact that, despite the undoubted challenges of the postmodern world, the Word of God in the hand of God is quite sufficient to do the work of God and to think otherwise is simply old fashioned unbelief. The more assured we are that we can master the self, the less reason we will have to seek from Christ and his death what we can find from ourselves. And the more confidence we place in business strategies and marketing techniques to "grow the Church" the smaller will be the place in the Church's life for the work of the Holy Spirit. It is our confidence in God, our desire to see him central and supreme in the Church, our knowledge of his Word, Cross, and Spirit, that makes us boldly countercultural and unmistakably culturally relevant. And if we ask why the evangelical movement has lost its edge despite its shameless trendiness, the answer is that it is no longer countercultural in the ways that it should be. Why is this so? The Church cannot sustain its cognitive and moral distance from this fallen world without an overwhelming sense of the centrality and supremacy of God and a great confidence in his power and presence.

### **Christianity Today Attacks**

The weakness of the evangelical church today, I believe, is in its knowledge and experience of God. That is why it was an ill omen when *Christianity Today* magazine descended from its perch, which is usually far above the fray, and published an editorial that took aim at classical theism and gave heart to the process theology being advocated by theologians Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Greg Boyd ( God vs. God, *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 34-5).

It was a curious piece. Rarely do editorialists at *Christianity Today* get enmeshed in discussions about the difference between analogical and univocal language (or language with similar meanings as opposed to only one meaning) and how anthropomorphisms work. That's pretty heady stuff. And rarely do they take aim at a significant part of the evangelical world, in this case, those who are Reformed. But that is what was done by this unnamed editorialist. And rarely has *Christianity Today's* timing been so off. To rebuff so large a part of the evangelical world successfully requires considerable moral authority. That is the kind of authority that *Christianity Today* has now forfeited.

The editorialist who wanted to set the evangelical world straight began by dismissing the boring concept of God presented by philosophical theism. Now if this anonymous author had meant the classical arguments for God's existence, such as the argument from design or the ontological argument, he or she might even have been able to enlist John Calvin in making the objection. Calvin thought that while the traditional arguments for God's existence did at least have the merit of stopping the mouths of unbelievers, we must nevertheless turn to God's own self-revelation in the biblical Word to know who he is. As it turned out, however, that was not really the point in this editorial. By the end of this little essay, it is clear that it is the Reformed tradition in its scholastic form, as epitomized by Princeton theologian Charles Hodge and Dutch American theologian Louis Berkhof, that is being assaulted. This, apparently, is the source of so many ill-conceived, unbiblical, and boring ideas about God.

Well, what would *Christianity Today* like to see in its place? The editorialist is a little coy about what should be advocated in place of Reformed ideas but by the end of the essay the door has

been opened. There is a caution here and there, to the Pinnock-Sanders-Boyd proposal, that God is genuinely baffled about the future, cannot see its outcomes, is limited in power, but is nevertheless struggling mightily in the adverse circumstances of life to save us because he loves us so much. (And this, we are to suppose, is not itself philosophical theism of a different kind!) The editorialist cites as evidence for this understanding of God the biblical references to his changing of his mind. No word studies are undertaken and no justification offered for this conclusion. The editorial simply assumes that because God is said to repent, that means that the Reformed view of God has been invalidated. That is where the heavy stuff about anthropomorphisms, and analogical / univocal language comes in.

It is true that the debate on the meaning of *naham*, which is sometimes translated to mean repent, has tended to follow two different paths. There are those who think that the word, when applied to God, means a change of mind or attitude without any necessary association with the feelings, and there are those who believe that it is principally about the feelings that accompany the change of mind or attitude. Let me suggest, however, that there is a way of putting together an understanding of these texts which does not get us entangled in the complexities of analogical and univocal language and, what is more important, does not entail the entire recasting of the being of God in the image of the postmodern philosophical self.

The basic confusion in the editorial is that it imagines that those who believe in the immutability (or changeless quality) of God necessarily believe also that he is static and immobile, that he is a lifeless statue far removed from the cut and thrust of everyday life, and remains rather unaffected by it all. Statements, such as the one cited by the editorialist in James 1:17 that with God there is no variation or shadow due to change, or the psalmist's declaration that the counsel of the Lord stands forever (Ps. 33:11), however, speak to his unchanging character and his fixed and steady purposes. They say nothing about his remoteness from life, which is what the editorialist apparently thinks is the Reformed position and finds so boring. Given God's immutability, then, what are we to make of the references to his repenting?

We should begin by remembering that some of our English translations do not always capture the full range of meaning in the original languages. In this instance, *naham* (in the niphal), is translated thirty-five times in the LXX as either *metamelomai*, meaning a change of heart or changed feelings, or by *metanoeo*, repenting or thinking differently about something. Thus, these references to divine repentance carry several slightly different meanings which the *Revised Standard Version* captures better than other translations: when the Lord saw the early wickedness on earth, he said "I am sorry that I have made them" (Gen. 6:7); the psalmist says that despite the disobedience of God's people, "He remembered for their sake his covenant, and relented according to his abundance of his steadfast love" (Ps. 106:45); then, again, the word can be translated as "pity," as when we read that "the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them" (Judg. 2:18). So, what are we to make of the twenty-seven occasions on which God is said to relent, have a change of heart, or have pity? Scholars across the centuries have pondered these verses including Philo in the time of Christ. The impression given in the editorial that the full weight of these texts has been largely ignored until Pinnock, in a small hotel room, brought the whole matter to light, is therefore a bit misleading. However, despite this considerable tradition of thought, there is no clear consensus as to how we should understand these texts although not all are problematic.

In a number of instances, repenting language is used of God to convey the thought of how pained he was by human behavior just as we are told, in the same language, that "Samuel grieved over Saul " (1 Sam. 15:35). The text already cited in Genesis 6 is a good example: God was "sorry that he had made humanity". Given the overall biblical context, however, the onus rests on the proponents of the "openness of God" to show that when God said this, he was not merely saying that he was deeply pained by them but that what he really meant to say was that he had just then realized what a monumental mistake he had made. Alongside of this sense of God being pained are those texts which speak, as it were, of an emotional release through the exercise of wrath as when God says to Isaiah that "I will vent my wrath on my enemies"(Isa. 1:24; cf: Ezek. 16:42). When applied to humans, this same word, in some instances, still carries an emotional sense of being comforted or consoled.

The more interesting use of *naham* in relation to God concerns those cases where there is a clearly built-in understanding that God will act in judgment if his people do not change their ways but will relent or repent if they do. In those cases where the people of God did repent in this way, then, God himself is spoken of as "relenting" or even "repenting". The principle is stated in Jeremiah 18:7-8: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. The repenting of God here says nothing about the changing of his mind and everything about the changing of the behavior of his people. This repenting has to do with the retraction of a proposed course of action on God's part when his people have a change of mind, or it may mean the withholding of blessing when they do not. At the heart of the prophetic message was this built-in understanding of how God would respond to sin. And when God does "relent" because people have repented, it is because of his unsurpassed goodness. This was what Jonah, in an ill moment lamented. When the Ninevites repented, God "repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them (Jon. 3:10)." Then Jonah lamented that he knew this would happen if the Ninevites repented, "for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil (Jon. 4:2)." It is these four divine characteristics that Nehemiah cites as the reason why God did not forsake his people even when they were rebellious (Neh. 9:16-17). What may seem more difficult to explain are those passages where God apparently changes his mind as to what he has said he will do because of intercessory prayer. A good example of this is found in the life of Moses as he prayed that the wrath of God would be turned away from the Israelites who had made the golden calf. "Turn from thy fierce wrath and repent of this evil against thy people, he prayed (Exod. 32:12)." Then Moses went down the mountain, rebuked the people, smashed the calf, called upon those of faith to destroy the idolaters, and then led those who remained in a deep, penitential prayer. God then judged them, but in answer to Moses' prayer, he did not destroy them. What are we to make of this? The best explanation, I believe, is that this is a variation on the principle that there is a built-in condition to God's pronouncements. In this case, he allows the prayers of a righteous person to function in a vicarious way on behalf of the offenders.

It is a little rash to assume, as this *Christianity Today* editorialist does, that what we are looking at in these texts is a cognitive change of mind on God's behalf. That ought to be apparent from 1 Samuel 15. First, we read that God says that "I repent that I have made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:11)"



but then, in the very same chapter, Samuel declares that "the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man that he should repent (I Sam. 15:29)." This is one of nine texts that state that God does not repent, another example being, "The lord has sworn and will not change his mind (Ps. 110:4)."

This editorial in *Christianity Today* is simply one illustration among many that could have been chosen of how confused the evangelical church has become. More than that, it shows that the growing definitional foggiess within Evangelicalism is now reaching into our understanding of God himself. It is one thing to debate the wisdom of using inerrancy; it is something entirely different to imagine that God is as hobbled and as baffled by life as we are.

The truth of the matter is that the fraying at the edges of the evangelical world has now turned into an unraveling at its center. First came the new definitions about who evangelicals were. Then the boundaries were shifted. Then they were crossed. And now the reality of God is redefined and made altogether more accommodating to our postmodern culture. It is for these reasons that I believe Evangelicalism is now in a free fall. I therefore hope that my writing will play an important role in bringing the Church back to more cogent, biblical understanding, a more serious mind, a greater love of truth and righteousness, and a closer walk with God.

###

This article was printed from Grace Online Library - [www.graceonlinelibrary.org](http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org)  
Please note that every attempt has been made to obtain the proper permission to use all of the material posted on our site. If you intend on reproducing this printed article, you may need to obtain the proper permission.