

The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience

By Ron Sider

Synopsis and [Comments](#) by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs CO 2006

Ron Sider is also the author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. His books are never dull or diplomatic in their call to obedience. As such, he has a reputation of being an “outsider” and has been labeled “over-zealous.” I suspect that sentiment is held by those whose consciences have been pricked by his scathing indictments. But he walks the talk with cleared eyes, and so I think he has earned the right and the duty to speak the truth to us in love. This book is extraordinary and should be on every Christian’s shelf, preached from every pulpit, and read every year as a reminder of the pitfalls that surround believers in the church as well as in the world. *Harken*.

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a great religion whose adherents had grown complacent, lukewarm, and skeptical. Many of its leaders rejected some of its basic beliefs. And so a renewal movement emerged who embraced the ancient faith. At the center of their preaching was a miraculous “new birth” that would begin a lifetime of moral renewal and transformation. The movement became one of the most influential wings of the religion, whose numbers translated into political influence. And so the leaders of the movement persuaded the top political leader to have the government work more closely with religious social service organizations to solve the nation’s social ills. They lobbied to strengthen the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, knowing their ancient texts say a lifelong covenant is the center of God’s design for the family.

However, despite the movement’s claims of miraculous transformation, polls showed that members of the movement divorced their wives as often as their secular neighbors, beat them as often, were almost as materialistic, and even more racist than their pagan friends. The skeptics smiled at the blatant hypocrisy, while the general population was puzzled and disgusted. Many of the movement’s leaders stepped up the tempo of their enormously successful and sophisticated promotional programs. Others wept. *This is roughly the situation of Western and American evangelicalism today.*

Gallup and Barna’s polls demonstrate that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general. Divorce is *more* common among born-again Christians than in the general American population. Only six percent of evangelicals tithe. White evangelicals are the *most* likely to object to neighbors of another race. Sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their non-evangelical peers. Alan Wolfe concludes, “The truth is, there is increasingly little difference between ... the ... entertainment industry, and the bring-‘em-in-at-any-cost efforts of evangelical megachurches.” George Barna concludes, “Every day, the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change.” Graham Cyster, a Christian I know from South Africa tells a painful story:

Two decades ago when he was struggling against apartheid as a young South African evangelical. One night, he was smuggled into an underground Communist cell of young people fighting

apartheid.¹ “Tell us about the gospel of Jesus Christ,” they asked, half hoping for an alternative to the violent communist strategy they were embracing. Graham gave a clear, powerful presentation of the gospel, showing how personal faith in Christ wonderfully transforms persons and creates one new body of believers where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor, black nor white. The youth were fascinated. One seventeen-year-old exclaimed, “That is wonderful! Show me where I can see that happening.” Graham’s face fell as he sadly responded that he could not think of anywhere South African Christians were truly living out the message of the gospel. “Then the whole thing is a piece of sh__,” the youth angrily retorted. Within a month he left the country to join the armed struggle against apartheid – eventually giving his life for his beliefs. P. 11-15

Compare this with the accounts of the vitality and reputation of the church in the first three centuries of its existence, and you’ll see how far we’ve fallen. In the second century, Justin Martyr said of Christians:

Those who once delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone; ... we who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now... share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies.

Writing in about AD 125, the Christian apologist Aristides described Christians with these words:

They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They do not despise the widow, nor grieve the orphan. He that has, distributes liberally to those who have not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him, as if it were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the spirit and God; but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs; and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they do not have an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days so that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.

By AD 250, the church at Rome supported fifteen hundred needy persons. Outsiders were amazed by the love they saw in the Christian community. Tertullian (AD 155-220) reported that even the enemies of Christianity considered the mutual love of Christians to be their “distinctive sign”: “Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy... See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.”

¹ You should know that the church and the governments of the West were willing to let apartheid continue because it was a “domestic issue,” and, some have said, because blacks were involved. It was reminiscent of the holocaust where the same thing had happened. As a result, the blacks of South Africa, including Nelson Mandela, were driven into the arms of the Communists. Mandela was denounced as a communist by the Western governments who backed the South African government against this uprising. The communists were the only ones willing to oppose apartheid, even if it was by force of arms. Once the battle was won, the church and the West celebrated the demise of apartheid as if they were responsible for it. In the Sudan, by comparison, the oppressed people were Christians. The Western governments were still unwilling to intercede in a domestic dispute, but the church did – perhaps because of its embarrassment over South Africa. It didn’t hurt that the oppressed people were identifiably Christian, and that their oppressors were Muslim. But its intercession was perceived as self-serving because the church was only speaking out for its own. If the church will not pursue justice consistently and universally, it will lose the moral authority to speak at all.

Julian the Apostate (AD 361-63), a pagan emperor, commented on the counter-cultural character of Christian behavior. Trying to roll back several decades of toleration to stamp out Christianity, he admitted to a fellow pagan that “the godless Galileans [Christians] see not only their poor but ours also.” With chagrin, he acknowledged that his fellow pagans did not even help each other: “Those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.”

There is a stunning contrast between what Jesus and the early church said and did and what so many evangelicals do today. Hopefully that contrast will drive us to our knees, first to repent, and then to ask God to help us understand the causes of this scandalous failure, and the steps we can take to correct it. P. 51-53

The Depth of the Scandal

Divorce

The statistics for divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, and neglect of a biblical worldview are devastating. Not only is the divorce rate about the same for born-again Christians and the general population, but 90 percent of all divorced born-again folk divorced *after* they accepted Christ.

Barna makes a distinction between born-again Christians and evangelicals. Born-again say “they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today.” They “believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.” They number 35-43 percent of the U.S. population.

“Evangelical” is a much smaller group – just 7 to 8 percent of the population. In addition to what the born-again folk believe, evangelicals believe Jesus lived a sinless life; eternal salvation is only through grace, not works; Christians have a personal responsibility to evangelize non-Christians; and Satan exists. Even so, 25 percent of evangelicals, just like 25 percent of the total population, have gone through divorce. In many parts of the Bible Belt, the divorce rate was roughly 50 percent *above* the national average. The Governor of Oklahoma concluded, “These divorce rates are a scalding indictment of what *isn't* being said behind the pulpit.” P. 17-20

Materialism and the Poor

Statistics show that the richer we become, the less we give in proportion to our income. In 1968, the average giving was 3.1 percent of income. By 1990 it was down to 2.66 percent.² In 1968, mainline denominations gave 3.3 percent of their income, while evangelicals gave 6.15 percent. By 1985, mainline contributions dropped to 2.85 percent, and evangelicals dropped to 4.74. By 2001, mainline members increased to 3.17 percent, but evangelicals continued to drop to 4.27 percent. Today, on average, evangelicals give about 2/5 of a tithe. In 2002, only 6 percent of born-again adults tithed, a 50 percent decline from 2000. Only 9 percent of evangelicals tithed.

² What these statistics do not show is the increase in taxes during the same period, the greatest part of which went to government-sponsored welfare programs. It resulted in an attitude by many Christians that part of their “tithe” was going to the government to take care of the poor and needy. In other words, the government in effect appropriated part of the church tithe, substituting itself for the church in community support. Consequently, the church became marginalized in the minds of non-Christians, and the government became our nation’s “social savior.”

To show the social impact, and the testimony this presents to the world, American Christians enjoy an average household income of \$42,409. The World Bank reports that 1.2 billion people try to survive on a dollar a day. If American Christians just tithed, they would provide \$143 billion to empower the poor and spread the gospel. The U.N. suggests that an additional \$70-80 billion a year would be enough to provide essential services like health care and education for all the poor of the earth. That would leave another \$60-70 billion to evangelize the world. P. 20-22

In the late 1970's, I attended a national conference of evangelical leaders. My small group, as I recall, included prominent persons like Carl Henry, the first editor of *Christianity Today*; Hudson Armerding, the president of Wheaton College; and Loren Cunningham, the founder of Youth with a Mission. Several times in our small group, different persons referred to the issue of a simple lifestyle, urging its importance. Finally, Loren Cunningham said something like the following: "Yes, I think the evangelical community is ready to live more simply – if we evangelical leaders will model it." That ended the discussion. There were no further recommendations to live more simply! P. 22

Sexual Disobedience

In the 1990's, the number of unmarried couples living together jumped a lot more in the Bible Belt where evangelicals constitute a large portion of the population than it did in the rest of the country – over 100% versus 72% in the rest of the country. Josh McDowell said years ago that evangelical youth are only 10% less likely to engage in premarital sex than non-evangelicals. Since 1993, 2.4 million young people have gone through a program called *True Love Waits*. Only 12 percent kept their pledge to wait until marriage for sex. The rates for sexually transmitted diseases for those who made the pledge as for those who did not. The rate of cohabitation among born-again folk is 25 percent versus 33 percent for the general population. Fully 26 percent of *traditional evangelicals* do not think premarital sex is wrong, and 13 percent do not think adultery is wrong. Among *nontraditional evangelicals*, 46 percent say premarital sex is morally OK, 19 percent think adultery is morally acceptable. The percent of Christian men involved in pornography is not much different than the unsaved. P. 22-24

Racism

When mainline Protestants and Jews joined African Americans in their struggle for freedom and equality in the 1960's, evangelical leaders were almost entirely absent. Founded in 1925, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary would accept black students but wouldn't allow them to sleep on campus, including a black man later elected to the board of trustees. Such racist policies were not abandoned until the 1950's. In his book *Sold Out*, Coach Bill McCartney speaks about regularly calling evangelicals to racial reconciliation. There would be wild enthusiasm when he was introduced, but when he made his plea, there was no response – nothing. It was a "morgue-like chill as I stepped away from the microphone." He thinks a major reason that attendance at Promise Keepers events dropped dramatically was their stand on racial reconciliation. P. 24-26

White conservative Protestants are more than twice as likely as other whites to blame lack of equality (e.g. income) between blacks and whites on a lack of black motivation rather than discrimination. Conservative Protestants are six times more likely to cite lack of motivation than unequal access to education. P. 26

Physical Abuse in Marriage

Women are more likely to suffer physical abuse in traditional marriages (where the husband is dominant) than in egalitarian marriages – 10.7 percent in traditional marriages versus 3 percent in egalitarian. Evangelicals disagree whether the Bible supports a traditional or egalitarian marriage, but spousal abuse in a study of 20,000 marriages was 400 percent more likely in traditional marriages. It is no less likely among conservative Protestants than others. The figures are more encouraging among that small percentage of evangelicals who not only assent to the truth of Scripture, but actually live it out (roughly 9 percent of evangelicals). P. 26-28; 126-129

The Biblical Vision

In the books of Romans and James, as well as generally in the NT, we find repeated calls to obedience as a consequence of our faith. Works without faith is self-righteousness. Faith without works is dead. It is a package deal. Faith *must* lead to works, not for salvation, but sanctification, *holiness*. Indeed, the word for “saints” literally means “holy ones.” We are not only *declared* righteous for purposes of justification, but we are to *become* increasing righteous in fact as a *testimony to God’s grace*. “You have been called to the obedience that comes through faith” Rom 1:5 “The law of the Spirit set me free from the law of sin and death... in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be *fully met in us*.” Rom 8:2-4 “Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ... Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin... Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace... You have become slaves to righteousness.” Rom 6:1-18

Because the Holy Spirit dwells in believers’ hearts, empowering them and transforming their character, Paul says they can now live the way God intends. *This isn’t advocating the Holiness Movement in which present perfection is possible. But it is a call to the full and committed pursuit of obedience to the Word of God.* From the beginning of chapter 12 in the Book of Romans, Paul switches from careful theological argument to ethical instruction. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In the rest of the letter, Paul mentions things that conforming to Christ means (p. 38-41):

- Giving generously to those in need (12:8)
- Sincere love for brothers and sisters (12: 9-10)
- Blessing those who persecute you (12:14)
- Sharing others’ joys and sorrows (12:15)
- Not repaying evil for evil (12:17)
- Keeping the commandments summed up in “love your neighbor as yourself” (13:9)
- Put aside drunkenness, sexual immorality, and jealousy ((13:13)

“Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (13:14). *In today’s world, we no longer equate what we want for ourselves at the expense of others as “the desires of the sinful nature.”* In 1 and 2 Corinthians, witness to

the realities in the early church of quarreling, jealousy, angry lawsuits, and sexual immorality. Church members who committed gross sexual misconduct were put out of the church. Paul added a long list of sins that require church discipline. “Do not associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber” (1cor 5:11 NRSV).

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1Cor 6:9-10

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” 2Cor 3:18 We are being transformed into the very image of Christ. There is no room whatsoever in this verse for Christians to continue year after year in the same sin, repeating a ritual confession every week and making no progress in holiness.

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” Gal 5:19-21. How can contemporary “Christians” who behave just like their unbelieving neighbors read such a passage without fear and trembling?³ P. 41-44

Cheap Grace vs. the Whole Gospel

Close to the center of the problem is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Cheap grace results when we reduce the gospel to forgiveness of sins; limit salvation to personal fire insurance against hell; misunderstand persons as primarily souls; at best, grasp only half of what the Bible says about sin; embrace the individualism, materialism, and relativism of our culture; lack a biblical understanding and practice of the church; and fail to teach a biblical worldview.

We have made it too easy to be “born again.” Slick evangelical marketers have offered eternal salvation as a free gift if you just say yes to a simple formula: “God loves you, humankind blew the relationship, but He has a plan for your life; just saying the magic words triggers the contract. Boomers studied the offer and realized it was a no-lose proposition: eternal security at nothing down, no future payments, just simple verbal assent. The deal specified nothing about life change.” (George Barna) Why not accept a no-cost fire insurance policy? The result, Barna sadly notes, is “born-again” people living just like everybody else.

Peter Gillquist in *Why We Haven't Changed the World* writes, “All the evangelism in the world from a church that is not herself holy and righteous will not be worth a hill of beans in world-changing power... Modern evangelicalism is in a modern Babylonian captivity and we do not yet know it.”

³ The answer in part is that they never read it, never hear it, and never speak it for fear of being labeled “legalists” by other Christians.

We *are* justified by faith alone, **but not by a faith which is alone (as the Reformers put it)**. We cannot accept Christ as Savior without embracing him as Lord. A genuine personal relationship with Christ brings sweeping transformation of our sinful selves. The gospel and salvation involve far more than forgiveness of sins. **Salvation has two components: our one-time justification caused by the perfect obedience and atoning sacrifice of Christ, and our ongoing sanctification caused by the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit applies the benefits of the cross to the experience of our life, through faith.**

There is simply no justification for saying that the glorious truth of justification by faith alone is more important than the astonishing reality that the Risen Lord now lives in his disciples, transforming them day by day into his very likeness. Justification and sanctification are *both* central parts of the biblical teaching on the gospel and salvation. To overstate the importance of the one is to run the danger of neglecting the other. And that is certainly what popular evangelicalism has done. We have propagated the heretical notion that people can receive forgiveness without sanctification, heaven without holiness. Notions of cheap grace are at the core of today's scandalous evangelical disobedience. P. 55-59 **You *must* have faith, but you *ought* to obey.**

The Gospel

The gospel is not offered for our private belief. We have been called into a kingdom which has both a King and a community, both of whom we are called to serve. The gospel is not defined as the forgiveness of sins, although Christ does offer unmerited forgiveness. Rather, the central aspect of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom, whether the "kingdom of God" or the equivalent "kingdom of heaven." This phrase appears 122 times in the synoptic gospels, and 92 times they are on the lips of Jesus himself. The good news is "the *good news of the kingdom.*" Mat 4:23 "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Mk 1:14-15 "The kingdom of God has come upon you." Mat 12:28 The only way to enter this kingdom is by sheer grace, by accepting God's freely given mercy. Forgiveness of sins is at the center of the proclamation of the gospel *of the kingdom.* P. 59-61

Jesus' gospel of the kingdom includes both vertical and horizontal aspects. Yes, we enter by grace because God gladly forgives prodigal sons and daughters who repent. That's the vertical part. But equally central is the new horizontal community of disciples, forgiven sinners all, who began to imitate Jesus in living according to the norms of the dawning kingdom – a kingdom where the poor would receive justice, and peace would prevail. They healed the sick, cared for the poor, and welcomed the marginalized into their fellowship. That's why the harmony of Jew and Gentile is part of the gospel, the mystery long hidden but now revealed.

The gospel was not proclaimed by word alone, but by word and deed. Words would have been enough if his gospel was just the forgiveness of sins. But since his gospel was the ushering in of the kingdom, Jesus had to demonstrate the *presence* of his kingdom, not just talk about it. Only if we recover Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, and allow its power to transform our sinful selves so that our Christian congregations (imperfect as they are) become visible holy signs of the dawning of the kingdom, will we *act-ually* be faithful to Jesus. Only then will our evangelistic words recover their integrity and power. P. 62-63

Salvation

The same one-sided, reductionist misunderstanding that distorts our conception of the gospel has distorted our conception of salvation. For too many evangelicals, Jesus' work of salvation is reduced to the cross, and the cross is reduced to substitutionary atonement. This part of biblical salvation is important, but it is not the only part. God not only forgives us for Christ's sake, but he also changes us, transforming not only our inner selves but our external behavior. He calls us to conversion as well as to forgiveness. It leads to a life of costly discipleship. In the power of the Holy Spirit, God creates a new social order, a new community of believers, where all relationships are being restored to holiness. All of this is part of what the NT means by salvation.

Some evangelicals give the impression that the only reason the Son of God came to earth was to die. It *is* one reason. But he also lived among us to teach and model a godly life, to show us how the Creator wants us to live. Furthermore, he came to burst from the tomb and conquer the power of death. There is also a tendency to think that the only purpose for Jesus' death was to offer a sacrifice for our sins in our place. It *is* one purpose. But John 3:16 says explicitly that we learn what real love is like through Jesus' model on the cross. And 1Jn 3:8 declares "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (also Heb 2:14-15): *Christus victor*. Also central to salvation is the fact that Jesus is both Savior and Lord. In fact, the NT uses "Savior" for Jesus only 16 times, while it refers to him as Lord 420 times!

Throughout the Bible, we see God's people trying to separate their relationship with God from their relationship with their neighbors. God rejects such a separation. "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" Mat 6:15. Our loving deeds for our neighbors do not earn divine acceptance. But they do indicate that we have accepted him as Lord as well as Savior.

Conversion and discipleship are two other indicators that salvation is more than forgiveness of sins. The NT uses three Greek words to talk about repentance and conversion: *epistrepho* 1994 literally means "to turn around." *Metanoia* 3341 (often translated "repentance") means "to change one's mind." The third word, *metamelomai* 3338, means "to care after" or "regret." These point to a radical transformation of thoughts and actions that takes place when a person repents, accepts Christ as Lord and Savior, and experiences conversion. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation" 2Cor 7:10.

Unfortunately, the initial stage of coming to Christ "is not followed up with very searching instruction on the depth of the problem of indwelling sin, the subtlety of involvement in corporate patterns of sin, and the grace of God available for the conquest of the flesh." (Richard Lovelace) The result is congregations of born-again Christians that are not very alive spiritually. We need to recover the Puritans' emphasis on a lifetime of mortifying the sin that clings so tenaciously and subtly to us. P. 64-68

Persons

The biblical understanding of “persons” is far more than individual souls. Each person, as John Stott put it, is a “body-soul-in-community.” It was the pagan philosopher Plato, not the biblical writers, who understood persons as primarily souls. Plato thought that each person had a good soul trapped in an evil body. The solution was for the soul to escape the body. In the biblical framework, persons are both body and soul: “God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Gen 2:7 Human beings have a material part and a spiritual part, and the material part is very good, so good that God took on flesh and became like one of us (Jn 1:14; Phil 2:8); so good that Jesus rose bodily from the dead and promises to raise us to a new bodily existence at his second coming, restoring even the groaning creation to wholeness (Rom 8:19-21).

On the other extreme are the secular philosophers like Marx and Darwin who see persons merely as complex material machines. Nothing exists beyond the material. This too is an unbiblical view. Nothing in the material world matters as much as our relationship with Christ. Understanding that we are made so that true life comes only when we are ready to give up material things, even physical life, frees us from materialism. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” Mat 16:25-26 Embracing this tension between the goodness but limitation of the material world will protect us from both Platonic asceticism [in which the material is nothing](#), and contemporary materialism [in which it is everything](#). P. 70-71

Persons are also communal beings. We are not made to be lone rangers or isolated hermits. We are created for community. We are made in the image of the Triune God, a loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We too are intended to live in relationship with others. That is clear from the fact that God made us males and females who need each other to reach God’s intention for our lives. We work together to build families, communities, and civilization. Western individualism largely ignores the communal aspect of human beings. Individual self-fulfillment becomes the highest value. The result is the destruction of covenantal family life, and devastating neglect of our responsibility to our neighbors and the common good. P. 72

Sin

Alan Wolfe thinks the widespread abandonment of the doctrine of sin is especially striking among evangelicals! “In no other area of religious practice, especially for evangelicals, is the gap between the religion as it is supposed to be, and religion as it actually is, as great as it is in the area of sin.” Even more striking, this self-confessed nonbeliever laments this “retreat from sin.”

We need recover the powerful biblical truth that *God hates sin*. That needs to be preached as clearly as the Bible teaches it. We also need to discover that in the Bible, sin is both personal and social. It affects not only the individual but the community. Our participation in unjust legal and economic systems without doing what God wants us to do to change them is *sin*. Overcoming evil demands both personal and structural transformation.

However, despite being as politically active as the mainline Protestants and Catholics, evangelicals believe that society is changed one person at a time, not structurally. Racism, in the eyes of evangelicals, is a personal issue, not a societal issue. It happens between people, not as a consequence of the system or the structure which feeds it. Promise Keepers also took this individualistic approach, urging individual white men to befriend individual black men. “The only way to change men is to change their hearts” not by “legislation, but by relationships.” This personal approach is right, but it’s only half right. Sin *is* deeper than social structures, and it *is* rooted in the human heart. [And if we change enough hearts, we’ll change the system... someday.](#)

Liberal theologians think that structural change is the *only* way to change society. We don’t want to make that mistake either. This isn’t an either-or choice. It’s a parallel path to change, and both are required because sin isn’t just personal, and it isn’t just social. Sin is community sin. If we have the power to pass laws that are just, we need to exercise that power. If we have the power to remove leaders who are corrupt and hurtful, then we need to exercise that power. Wilberforce and other evangelical abolitionists took a systemic approach to ending slavery. They didn’t argue that the only way to end slavery was to convert all the slave owners. Bad structures foster immoral behavior. Good systems encourage moral actions. We are communal beings who are influenced by the persons and systems that surround us. If we understand this, we will work to overcome racism and injustice through both personal and structural strategies. P. 73-77

Conform to Culture, or Be the Church?

Conforming to Culture

American popular culture is sick to death. And the illness has swept through the church. Hollywood’s outrageous sexual values and crazy consumerism are rooted in pervasive, long-standing individualism and materialism that have taken deep root in our culture. What early generations of evangelicals assumed and embraced about mutual responsibility and accountability in the body of Christ has largely been lost. The gospel of individual self-fulfillment now reigns.

Individualism and materialism are rooted in the Enlightenment’s abandonment of historic Christian theism. For almost 1500 years, Western civilization had been grounded in a shared conviction that God, at the center of reality, was the source of moral norms, governmental authority, truth, and beauty. But in the 18th century, leading thinkers argued that science would make the “hypothesis” of God unnecessary. Nothing exists except the material world. And so the individual replaced God at the center of reality.

Immanuel Kant thought that human reason could be the source of a universal ethic. But then in the 19th century Charles Darwin argued that all that exists is merely the result of a blind evolutionary process. Ethical and religious ideas were merely subjective notions that enable the fittest to survive. Karl Marx persuaded many that all our thoughts, including our ethical and religious ideas, are simply the product of economic forces. In the early 20th century, Freud explained away religion and ethics as the result of infantile needs and projections. A widespread pervasive relativism spread throughout the intellectual world. Nothing was left but the lonely individual, arbitrarily creating subjective meaning for him or herself.

This relativism remained confined to academic circles for awhile. But in the revolution of the 1960's, the radical ideas spread quickly from college campuses to the popular domain. Self-fulfillment for the sovereign individual became the highest value. Pop psychology taught that you should choose whatever contributed to your personal happiness. If your spouse wasn't meeting your needs, you owed it to yourself to get another. Society cast aside historic Christian ethical norms. Once the restraints were gone, the media glamorized promiscuity. No-fault divorce swept through the legislatures. And the resulting plague of single parents, broken families, drugs, pain, and abandonment consumed our society.

In the last couple of decades, postmodernism has heightened the relativism. Postmodernists reduce all ethical norms and truth claims to the self-centered power games of groups, races, and classes. Nothing is true or right. All statements are simply the product of some group's or class's desire to dominate others for their own selfish advantage. Whatever feels right for me is right for me, and whatever feels right for you is right for you. The only sin is to claim that there is an absolute right and wrong, or that what a person chooses is immoral.

Materialism has lost its boundaries. The Sabbath reminded people that once in every seven days we should forget productive work and focus especially on worship of God. Happiness comes from that relationship, and not from material things. But Darwin's ideas discounted the value of anything except material things that could be measured and tested. Love and justice are incorporeal fictions of an undefined survival mechanism. Thus income and GDP became the new marks of success and happiness. [Consumerism was born. Madison Avenue stroked the ego of all those individualists who wanted to have anything and everything "their" way.](#) Market economies were producing ever greater material abundance to satisfy the unleashed purchasing drive of the Western world. Eighty-six percent of Americans tell pollsters they believe in God, but they have become practical materialists, [worshipping Mammon as their god.](#)

And in the church, we abandoned both the Sabbath and the Bible. Only 14 percent of born-again adults "rely on the Bible as their moral compass, *and* believe that moral truth is absolute." We have produced gospels of wealth, or more sophisticated justifications of "godly materialism" to sanctify evangelicals' increasing preoccupation with material abundance. Parents focused on growing salaries, neglecting their children. Successful professionals worked long hours even if it destroyed their marriages. Understanding the difference between mathematical truth, and their personal preference for a song, a group of *church* students was asked if the deity and resurrection of Christ was true in the sense of mathematics, or in the sense of a preference for a song? Every student for six years has said it's like a song preference. It is matter of opinion. P. 85-90

Being the Church

Jesus expects the church to be his holy community living according to biblical norms rather than worldly values. How can we do that? Through mutual accountability and the power of the Spirit. Six points are crucial:

1. *Jesus is the source, center, and Lord of the church* – He is the head, and the church is his body. We enter his church through baptism; we are renewed through the Lord's Supper;

and we invite non-Christians to embrace the good news of his kingdom. Wherever we look, Christ is at the very core of everything we do.

2. *The church is holy* – The very purpose of Christ coming to earth was to create a holy community, “to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” Tit 2:14. “Be holy, because I am holy” 1Pet 1:14-16. We are his virgin bride, chaste and pure. 2Cor 11:1-2.
3. *The church is a community*, not a collection of lone rangers. “I pray that they may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in your” Jn 17:21 “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” 1Pet 2:9-10
4. *The church is counter-cultural* because it submits to biblical norms – its community lives a lifestyle that fundamentally challenges worldly values and practices. “I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against the soul” 1Pet 2:11. “Come out from them and be separate” 2Cor 6:17.
5. *Mutual accountability and responsibility are essential* to this new social order – The earliest Jerusalem Christians shared so deeply that “there were no needy persons among them” Acts 4:34. Paul insisted that rich Christians who would not share with the poor at the Lord’s Supper destroyed the essence of the sacrament because they were denying the oneness of the body of Christ (1Cor 11:29). The purpose of spiritual gifts given to individual members was to build up the whole body, so that all members come to full maturity in Christ. Eph 4:13.
6. *Only in the power of the Spirit* can this community be righteous and counter-cultural – Paul declares that believers can now fulfill “the righteous requirements of the law” because we live “according to the Spirit” Rom 8:4. Because the Spirit lives in us, we can say no to sin (Rom 8:11-14). “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” Gal 5:16. Only in the power of the Spirit can we truly be the body of Christ.

P. 94-110

Practical Steps

- First, we must discover and implement practical ways to strengthen accountability in the body of Christ. That means stronger accountability structures for congregations and parachurch organizations, small groups for all church members, and a renewed practice of church discipline.
- Second, somehow we must dethrone mammon and materialism in our hearts and congregations through a more faithful use of our money.

Church Networks - The notion and practice of independent congregations with no structures of accountability to the larger body of Christ is simply heretical. Being part of Christ’s one body means listening to and submitting to the other parts of that body. There is simply no biblical justification for any local congregation to fail or refuse to join a wider network of churches that provides guidance, supervision, direction, and accountability.

Parachurch Organizations – We must also find a way to strengthen mutual accountability for parachurch organizations. They are wonderful and valuable, but they have a fundamental flaw.

They are autonomous with almost no accountability. Frankly, I do not know how to solve this problem.

Small Groups - Within the local congregation, one of the best structures for strengthening mutual accountability for individual church members is small groups. Every congregation with more than fifty members ought to establish a network of small groups and call all its members to join one. If small groups stay together long enough, deep trust can develop and can encourage honest sharing of real struggles. They can discuss major decisions, significant financial choices, a potential marriage, a career change and so on. Persons come to know each other well enough to sense when a friend is struggling in some area. John Wesley called this loving, caring, and accountability within small groups “watching over one another with love.” He insisted on tough love, where members asked each participant hard questions every week, including, “Where did you sin this week?”

Small groups don’t just happen. A congregation’s leaders must teach their importance and explain their theological found in the biblical doctrine of the church. Good small group leaders must be trained. Ongoing oversight of the leaders is essential. But they offer both a powerful answer to the widespread loneliness of isolated individuals, and an effective means of mutual accountability. Members of a counter-cultural group find it very hard to maintain their ideas unless they enjoy strong communal bonds within the circle of those who share these divergent ideas. It is virtually impossible to resist sinful desires by oneself. We need intimate, ongoing fellowship in a Christian community.

Church Discipline – This used to be a significant and accepted part of most evangelical traditions. Calvin wrote, “As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so discipline forms the ligaments which connect the members together, and keep each in its proper place.” In the second half of the 20th century, however, it has largely disappeared. Haddon Robinson summarizes the current scene:

Too often now when people join a church, they do so as consumers. If they like the product, they stay. If they do not, they leave. They can no more imagine a church disciplining them than they could a store that sells goods disciplining them. It is not the place of the seller to discipline the consumer. In our churches, we have a consumer mentality.

We simply must recover this biblical practice. Certainly we must do it wisely and lovingly. Language about courts and trials is not appropriate. Church discipline is simply watching over one another in love. It must start with the biblical meaning of joining the church. It is totally impossible to exercise church discipline if church members do not understand that joining this body means joining a community of mutual support and accountability, where everyone expects that other members will lovingly challenge them to more faithful discipleship. The second step is to implement small group structures for mutual support and accountability.

Church Membership - It would also strengthen the church if we made it harder to join. For much of the first three centuries, new converts went through an extensive teaching process [called catechesis](#). Conservative churches are growing because they make high demands. Weak, declining churches do not. Early Anabaptists and Wesleyans were in no hurry to take someone

into membership. Tests of membership included behavior as well as doctrine. Churches that retain their distance from the culture encourage distinctive lifestyles, and belief then grows.

Dethroning Mammon – Many, if not most, Western Christians worship the god of materialism. If their behavior is any measure, they care more about accumulating things than obeying God. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” Mat 6:21. How can we persuade our people to forsake this idol? It must start with biblical teaching and preaching. Not one pastor in ten comes even close to talking as much about the poor as the Bible does. Our evangelical preachers must correct this heretical disobedience. But words alone are not enough.

Our people, especially congregational leaders, need to see poverty firsthand. Mission trips, either across town to spend a weekend with an African American or Latino congregation, or to another country in Africa or Latin America, can be powerful change agents. Congregations may need to help individuals and families fashion specific, concrete ways to move from consumerism to sharing. Start a movement of Christians who decide to use a “graduated tithe” in their giving. The more income they receive, the higher percentage they give to Christian ministry. Think of the impact if evangelical giving to empower the poor here and abroad became so substantial that the first thought that came to secular people’s minds when they heard the word ‘evangelical’ was, “Oh yes, they are the people who are dramatically reducing poverty around the world.”
P. 110-119

Rays of Hope

Obedience means unconditional submission to Jesus as Lord as well as Savior. It means abandoning our one-sided, unbiblical conceptions of sin, the gospel, salvation, and conversion, and returning to a full-blown biblical understanding of these glorious truths. It means recovering the biblical reality of the church as community. It means living the truth that orthodoxy and orthopraxis – right theology and right behavior – are equally important. Some of us are doing exactly that, and it is cause to rejoice.

In 1992, Gallup and Jones published a book called *The Saints Among Us*. Using a 12-question survey to identify “heroic and faithful individual” Christians, they found that these Christians lived differently. They exhibited “costly behavior” making statements like “I do things I don’t want to do because I believe it is the will of God” and “I put my religious beliefs into practice in my relations with all people regardless of their backgrounds.” Those who agreed with every question on the survey were labeled “saints,” and those who strongly agreed with every one were labeled “super-saints.”

Only 42% of Christians spent a good deal of time helping people in need, but 73% of saints, and 85% of super-saints did. Only 63% said they would not object to having a neighbor of a different race, but 84% of the saints and 93% of the super-saints said they would not object. Interestingly, a disproportionate percentage of the saints were women, African Americans, and earning less than \$25k per year.

In another survey, evangelicals were more than three times as likely to give a “lot” of money to help the poor and the needy as those who call themselves non-religious. Yet, of all evangelicals,

only 29% gave a lot. Christians heavily involved in activities at their church were almost four times more likely to volunteer to help the poor, sick, and homeless outside church than those of low religious commitment (44% vs. 12 %).

Testing for a biblical worldview, Barna looked for those who believe the Bible is the moral standard, and also think that absolute moral truths exist and are conveyed through the Bible. In addition, they agree that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who still rules the universe; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; Satan is a real, living entity; salvation is a free gift, no something we can earn; every Christian has a personal responsibility to evangelize; and the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches. Only 9% of born-again adults have a biblical worldview (about 4% of the general population) and only 2% of born-again teenagers. That's the bad news.

The good news is that those with a biblical worldview are 9 times more likely to avoid "adult only" material on the Internet. They are 4 times more likely to boycott objectionable companies and products. They are twice as likely to intentionally choose not to watch a movie because of bad content. They are 3 times more likely not to use tobacco, and twice as likely to volunteer to help needy people. Nearly half have volunteered more than an hour in the previous week to an organization serving the poor (vs. 29% of other born-again adults, and 22% of other Christians). They are twice as likely to read their Bible each week.

Evangelicals generally are 5 times less likely to put their career first. Conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly have lower rates of domestic abuse than others. Nationwide, 37% of born-again adults attend Sunday School each week, but 65% of evangelicals do; 28% of born-again adults attend small groups during the week, but 53% of evangelicals do.

When we can distinguish nominal Christians from deeply committed, theologically orthodox Christians, it is clear that genuine Christianity does lead to better behavior, at least in some areas. [Here's an interesting encouragement](#): 9 out of 10 Christians of *every* stripe said that if their churches specified things they should personally do to grow spiritually, they would at least listen to the advice and follow most of the recommendations. That suggests a lot of openness to more solid biblical discipling; [or else Christians of every stripe do not believe that anonymously lying to a pollster is a sin](#). P. 126-130