

Appendix 3

David F. Wells: 'Bleeding'

In this Appendix, I lightly comment on some extracts from the article 'The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church' written by David F. Wells, which he drew from his 1996 Banner of Truth booklet of the same name. Although Wells was concerned with the evangelical churches in America during the last quarter of the 20th century, the article reaches much further than that, and is still highly significant a quarter of a century later.

As I quoted in the body of my book, according to Wells:

The market... is affecting both the internal ethos in the church and its external organisation. Internally, it is inclining us to think of sinners as consumers... The market is changing the external structures of evangelicalism, most obviously by encouraging us to think that religion provides us with a field of opportunity.

Wells probed this:

In 1993 a very interesting study was done which revisited George Gallup's [1970s] figure of 32% of adult Americans who claim to be reborn [that is, regenerate]. What this study did was to add just a few modest tokens of commitment as additional tests. In addition to asking: 'Are you born again?', they also asked: 'Do you go to church with some regularity, do you pray with some regularity, and do you have some minimal structure of formal Christian belief?' When those tests were added, the figure of 32% dropped to 8%. And if we were to probe just a little bit more... based on some ongoing research I have seen, my guess is that the figure may be no more than 1% or 2%. What this means is that we may have been living in a fool's paradise. When Gallup produced his figures in the 1970s, and has repeated them every year ever since, it seemed like evangelicals were on a roll with such wide popular support and with churches that were growing. It looked as though we were

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on the verge of sweeping all of our religious and cultural opponents before us... But it has turned out to be an optical illusion. The reality that we have to face today is that we have produced a plague of nominal evangelicalism which is as trite and superficial as anything we have seen in Catholic Europe.

The point I want to make is that this is still going on, and if it is not reversed – and quickly – within a few short years the harvest will be dire.

Wells probed the root cause of this ‘plague of nominal evangelicalism which is... trite and superficial’:

Now, why is this? Well, I would like to suggest that it begins with the crumbling of our theological character. I have spoken of this in my book *No Place for Truth* in terms of the ‘disappearance of theology.’ It is not that theological beliefs are denied, but that they have little cash value. They don’t matter.

Let me reinforce this. It is key. As I have argued in the body of the book, for the modern evangelical, doctrine is not paramount; certainly, doctrinal distinctives must not be stressed – such an emphasis would militate against the overriding purpose of attracting pagans into prolonged church attendance in order to maximise evangelistic opportunity among them. And even where the old words are retained, their meanings can be subtly ‘adjusted’ to meet the overriding agenda. The consequence is a catastrophic decline in doctrinal understanding and emphasis; indeed, a signal indifference to doctrine.¹

But as Wells went on to say:

¹ Let me repeat a previous note. Recently, I asked an intelligent young man, a member of a Reformed Baptist church, what he understood by ‘justification’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘propitiation’. His inadequate answers were not the worst of it; he showed no curiosity about why I had asked my question, nor why I had picked on these words.

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An evangelical faith that is not passionate about truth and righteousness is a faith which is a lost cause. All that it will then be living for is simply its own organisational preservation.

What can we do about it? What must we do about it? Wells:

First, we must recover the lost word of God. The problem is not, of course, that the Bible itself has disappeared. There are, in fact enough Bibles in America [and the UK] to put one in every home. No, the problem is that we are not *hearing* [emphasis mine; that is, not listening to] the word of God. It does not rest consequentially upon us. It does not cut. And it is surely one of the great ironies of our time that in the 1970s and 80s so much of our effort was put into defining inspiration and looking at what were the best words to express and protect it. And while all of that work was going on, unnoticed by us, the church was quietly unhitching itself from the truth of Scripture *in practice* [emphasis mine]. Biblical inspiration was affirmed, but its consequences were not worked out for our preaching, our techniques for growing the church [that is, increasing the numbers in attendance], our techniques for healing our own fractured selves. These all happened largely without the use of Scripture.²

Indeed, as I have shown, the re-engineers of the *ekklēsia* have been going to the world for its ideas, manipulating Scripture to support the introduction of those ideas into the *ekklēsia*; indeed, dominating the *ekklēsia*.³

As Wells observed:

It is as if we think that while the Bible is inspired, it is nevertheless inadequate to the tasks of sustaining and nourishing the 20th century! The result of this divine myopia is that [it] has left us with something that is inadequate to the great challenges that we face today. If we do not recover the sufficiency of the word of God in our time [above all, I (DG) would say 'the authority of the

² See my *Relationship* for what I describe as the prostitution of Scripture.

³ See my *Relationship*.

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word of God in our time'], if we do not re-learn what it means to be sustained by it, nourished by it, disciplined by it, and unless our preachers find the courage again to preach its truth, to allow [better, to make sure – DG] their sermons to be defined by its truth, we will lose our right to call ourselves Protestants, we will lose our capacity to be the people of God, and we will set ourselves on a path that leads right into the old discredited liberal Protestantism. We have to recover a vivid other-worldliness by making ourselves once again captives to the truth of God regardless of the cultural consequences.

'Regardless of the cultural consequences'! Alas, many evangelicals today tune into pagan culture – not merely to engage with unbelievers, but to adjust the 'gospel' they proclaim to them.⁴

Wells:

We, today, are actually on the verge of a fresh theological discovery of a very different kind [to that which evangelicals used to believe]. It is that God is centrally love, and that he is only peripherally and remotely holy. And in so doing we are on the verge of standing Scripture on its head. No, the holiness of God is not peripheral[!]. It is central, and without this holiness our faith loses its meaning entirely. As P.T.Forsyth declared a century ago: 'Sin is but the defiance of God's holiness, grace is but God's action upon sin, the cross is but God's victory, and faith is but God's worship'.⁵ And so without a compelling vision of the holiness of God, worship inevitably loses its awe, the truth of God's word loses its interest, obedience loses its virtue, and the church loses its moral authority. And it is precisely here that modernity – which in the New Testament is more or less synonymous with 'the world' –

⁴ See my *Mistaken*.

⁵ Original: 'Sin is but the defiance of God's holiness, grace is but its action upon sin, the cross is but its victory, and faith is but its worship'.

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has made its deepest intrusion into the life of the church.⁶ Modernity has rearranged our appetites.

Because of our therapeutic culture, we favour relational matters over those that are moral, the consequence of which is that God's holiness is pushed into the background and his love is brought into the foreground. Mysticism then flourishes, and cognitive [that is, thinking, rational] conviction retreats. Self-surrender is devalued and self-fulfilment is prized. Preoccupation with the character fades, and fascination with personality and self-image advance. The God in whom love has replaced wrath produces a Christianity that is appealing for its civility [I (DG) would add 'entertainment value and self-esteem'], but one that has no serious word for a world which is racked by evil. It is a form of belief that is sympathetic but not searching, that tells the world that the church exists to help, but fails to preach the holiness of God.⁷ Without the holiness of God, sin is just failure – but not failure before God!⁸ It is failure without the presumption of guilt, without retribution, indeed without any serious moral meaning at all. And without the holiness of God, grace is no longer grace. It is not grace from God, grace from the God who, against his own holy nature, has reconciled sinners to himself in Christ. And without justification there is no gospel, and without the gospel there is no Christianity. So if we lose sight of the holiness of God, we lose the right to call ourselves Protestants in any recognisably historical sense.

I must pause to underline some key words and phrases which capture a growing feature of the defective way in which the 'gospel' is proclaimed today:

⁶ To add clarity, I have re-phrased the original: 'And it is precisely here that modernity, which is more or less synonymous with "the world" in the New Testament, has made its deepest intrusion into the life of the church'.

⁷ Original: 'It is a form of belief that is sympathetic but not searching, that lends its ear but not its revelation of the Holy One'.

⁸ Precisely my point in my *Mistaken*.

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...our therapeutic culture... self-fulfilment... fascination with personality and self-image... sin is... failure without the presumption of guilt, without retribution...⁹

Having exposed the way the culture is affecting the what and the how of gospel preaching, Wells continued:

Until this is seen afresh, until it enters the very innermost fibres of our being, our virtue is going to be without seriousness, our believing without gravity, our practice without moral pungency, our worship without joyful seriousness, and our preaching without power. And without these virtues, these virtues of an historic Protestant faith, the church today is simply going to become just one more special interest in a world that is awash with special interests. Modernity will not have its power to rearrange our inner lives destroyed. What is most lost is what most needs to be recovered. It is the unsettling, disconcerting, moral presence of God in our midst. He can no longer be the junior partner in our religious enterprises, and he can never be just an ornamental decoration upon our church life. It is because God now rests so inconsequentially upon the church that the church is free to plot and to devise its success in its own way. That is why so many of our forbearers in the faith would scarcely even recognise us as their children today. Today, the evangelical world is bleeding...

And so may God give us the willingness to repent where we must, and may he give us again the desire to think large thoughts of him and his truth. And may he enable us to disengage our faith from the culture in order that we might freshly re-engage the culture out of a passionate concern for truth and righteousness. This is a time when we can seek again the grace of God to these ends. Let us seek his grace so that the evangelicalism that we leave behind [us, to our children], that which the coming generation sees, is one that is filled with the excellence of the knowledge of God. Amen.

⁹ See my *Mistaken*.