

The Need for Evangelical Reformation, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

Well, this opening session, it's my task to show you the need for Evangelical Reformation. First, I want to trace some evidences of Evangelical drift, and show the, the pattern of decline that we see in the culture around us. If we were to ask a typical Evangelical in a typical Evangelical church, what is an Evangelical, we're likely to get some kind of a self-referential answer; an Evangelical is what I am. Not helpful, really. Or, I attend an Evangelical church, so my church is Evangelical. Come and see what it's like. But, there's no real idea of what that term Evangelical means, or what regulates the movement, what puts boundaries around it, what keeps it accountable.

You may not know it now, looking around today, but Evangelicalism was set once on a very strong doctrinal foundation, going all the way back to the early years of the Protestant Reformation. They used the word Evangelical to

distinguish themselves as the Gospel preachers, the Gospel people; by the end of the nineteenth century, there was an encroaching liberalism coming into the Evangelical/protestant mainline churches. Protestant mainline denominations were facing an anti-supernatural, evolutionary presuppositions coming out of the Enlightenment. The denial of the authority itself, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

So, the Evangelical reaction to this encroachment of liberal ideas, known as modernism in the protestant mainline churches, was called fundamentalism. And that liberal fundamentalist conflict could be quite acerbic at times. It could be feisty. Many grew weary of the fight over the years.

And when we go through two world wars, people come home from the battlefield, and they are tired of fighting. And so, the post-World War II generation, there's a new Evangelicalism forming up, finding a middle way, really, between the doctrinal concerns of the fundamentalists and the social sympathies of the liberals. Sounds familiar. Sounds like history's repeating itself today.

On the one hand, the new Evangelicals wanted to protect the fundamental tenants of orthodoxy, things like the inspiration, inerrancy, authority of Scripture; the supernatural nature of the Christian religion, the Bible, the new birth; centrality of the Gospel, the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ, Christ's mandate to evangelize and disciple, to build the church. And, on the other hand, those new Evangelicals did not want to appear intolerant any longer. They did not want to appear pugnacious, like they were fighters. Seems like, maybe, it could seem like a noble enterprise.

Which side of the, that tension prevailed, do you think? What is the fruit of the new Evangelicalism? What does the word Evangelical mean today by most people who self-identify as Evangelicals? The word Evangelical now, seems to me as an observer, any non-Roman Catholic, non-mainline protestant religious group, or person who adheres to a protestant religious group, like a church. They see the Bible and Jesus as important, centrally important, even. They follow a formulaic pattern of a message that they call Gospel. And there is an impulse to influence people to join their cause, their church, their

movement, or whatever they're propagating. So, that's the evangelistic side of it, the evangelistic impulse.

With that brief description, and it, hopefully it seems vague to you, cause it is vague. I trust you see the problem, because by defining Evangelicalism in such broad terms, that means it can embrace everyone from Joel Osteen to John MacArthur, everyone from Beth Moore to Phil Johnson, everyone from Steven Furtick to Don Green, and us.

So, while seeing the Bible and Jesus as centrally important is a good thing, it's just not narrow enough. Mormons can say the same thing. The Bible's important. Jesus is important. Same thing with Roman Catholics. There are no standards, no accountability for any Evangelical with regard to how they handle Scripture, how they handle the Bible that they call centrally important, how they interpret Jesus, who they say he is, what he came to do. Just as long as those matters are centrally important, then they are Evangelicals.

Whoever has like a clever shtick and a magnetic personality, all those who are seeking fame, influence, big paychecks, driven by pride and ambition, if they fly the banner of: I'm being evangelistic, all things to all people. They say it's all under the rubric of: we're being evangelistic, we want to see those people saved.

I'd like us to look at Evangelicalism from maybe the eyes of the uninformed, maybe the eyes of the world as they look in and turn on the news, and look on the internet, and see what stories and headlines are floating past. What does it look like to them? We'll start with the unpleasant, the moral, public scandals that run like sewage and stain the Evangelical reputation and profile. Immoral behavior among very high-profile Evangelicals. I'll just name names and you'll see, you can probably see in your mind the story, the headline that came out.

It's terrible when you think that Ted Haggard was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and to know that he was caught up in severe drug use, and abuse, and prostitution with, male prostitute. Tullian Tchividjian, that name, sexually immoral grandson of Billie Graham. Bill Hybels,

the one who set so many churches in the 80's and 90's and 2000's along the path of mega, mega, mega. Build the numbers and bring them all in. And the whole time he's been sexually immoral internally in the church. Jerry Falwell, Carl Lentz, Ravi Zacharias, those stories, you can look them up.

Setting aside the immoral sexual scandals, we see immoral leadership by men like Mark Driscoll and James McDonald. Both of those men were founding counsel members of the Gospel Coalition. Mark Driscoll is the bad boy of Reformation Theology, and yet he's founded his church based on a dream. Now he's gone down after being expelled from the movement he started, he's down in Arizona doing it all over again. James McDonald actually tried to hire a hitman to kill his ex-son-in-law.

What is going on? You can't really make this up. Truth is stranger than fiction. We see in the Evangelical churches divorce, pornography, fornication, co-habitation, now LGBTQ+. Some Evangelicals have capitulated on homosexuality; people like Beth Moore, Max Lucado. Others have apostatized altogether: Jen Hatmaker, Joshua Harris. It's tragic. And that moral drift then draws attention to a cultural drift. What I mean by that is

there has been an appropriation of worldly culture in order to be relevant in the world, in order to gain influence and attract followers who are worldly.

Look, from hip hop hipster culture of Hillsong to the Country Western culture of The Cowboy Church. They define this and defend it as a strategy to win the culture, but it looks more like they just love the world. They're not calling sinners out of a sinful culture and critiquing a sinful culture. They're not calling them to repent and live holy lives. They're just appropriating it and living in it, not troubled at all by what comes along with it.

That cultural drift reveals ecclesiological drift. An understanding of what the church is for, Evangelicals have forgotten that. Rather than equipping the saints, an equipping center for God-fearing Christians, rather than a place where Christians come to hear and receive the teaching, and reproof, and correction, and training in righteousness, many Evangelicals now consider church as an event, something that they can use to attract their unbelieving friends, something that's cool, something that looks more like the tonight show. Pastors and

church staff, they serve the event. They serve the attractional elements in the event. They cater to the consumers. They're there to entertain, and inspire, and motivate, and provide, even, in some churches, group therapy. Pastors are not shepherds.

Andy Stanley believes that model, shepherding, is outmoded, needs to be replaced by a CEO model. The ecclesiological drift has been caused, in large part, by an institutional drift. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and he said, "I will build my church." The church is an institution, but what we're seeing now is a distortion of this institution called the church. The institution that Jesus Christ bled for, died for, redeemed with his own blood; the church, the institution that he ordained is the Christian church.

But it was after World War II that parachurch organizations began to set the agenda for the churches. In Ian Murray's book, *Evangelicalism Divided*, he draws attention to the influence of one man in that enterprise, and it's Billy Graham. I know that God has done good things through Billy Graham's life, inasmuch as his, his message has stayed near to the Gospel of Scripture.



We can see that people are saved through that. But to recruit the necessary workforce in order to promote and execute on his massive evangelistic crusades, revivals, Billy Graham needed the cooperation and participation of churches in a very wide range of denominational backgrounds. So, he pursued an ecumenical strategy for pragmatic reasons, dropping the doctrinal differences in order to bring the most people together so he could bring the most people in. It's exact same thing that's happening in many of our so-called Evangelical churches today.

Ian Murray writes, quote, "One of Graham's most frequently repeated sayings from 1957 onwards was, 'The one badge of Christian discipleship is not orthodoxy, but love.'" To set those two in contradistinction to one another, that is a terrible misunderstanding of truth.

But who could argue with Billy Graham's numerical successes? He packed stadiums by the tens of thousands and became the very handsome face and smooth voice of the success of

the new Evangelicalism. He surrounded himself with scholars, especially from Fuller Seminary. And Billy Graham set the tone for future Christian institutions, household names that many older people will recognize very well: Wheaton College, Fuller Seminary.

The publications of *Christianity Today* and *Decision Magazine*, *Youth for Christ*, *InterVarsity Christian Fellowship*, *Urbana*, *Student Missions Conferences*, *World Congress on Evangelism*, the *Lausanne Movement*, *Bible Study Fellowship*, Billy Graham had his hands in the start of all those things and, held by his ecumenical orthodoxy verses love mentality, sowed the seeds of that into all those institutions.

So again, those institutions, they're not churches, but they're parachurch institutions. They have trained Christian laity for decades. They have especially trained and educated the young people. So, the young people have a whole different understanding of what Christianity is. They don't have an appreciation for the local church. In fact, the local church seems to them to be a stifling institution, not one that allows them to be performative and to see their gifts realized. So,

they left the environment of the local church, preferring instead the exciting institutions of this new Evangelicalism on a new frontier of new growth and new possibilities.

Worldwide evangelization seemed to be within their grasp. They imbibed a spirit of revivalism and ecumenism. They're doctrinally Arminian, and they're American pragmatic, measuring success by counting nickels and noses. All of them embraced Billy Graham's ecumenism, with an aversion to doctrine since doctrine divides. And many who rose to leadership in parachurch institutions, they're not ordained, they're not theologically trained, they're not biblically qualified for eldership or leadership in the local church.

Nonetheless, they influence local churches, entering into local churches and encouraging them to be suspicious of doctrine. Resulted in theological anemia, a weakness in the local churches. They opted instead for producing concert or conference-like experiences every single Sunday, every single weekend for Sunday visitors.

In the visible Evangelical world, the parachurch has prevailed over the church. And we understand that saying, The mistress has supplanted the bride of Christ. The evidence to that? Well, the most popular, well-recognized form of visible Evangelical Christianity is represented by the megachurch.

More than five hundred churches in this country have more than two thousand members, which qualifies them as megachurches. If they have more than ten thousand people, those are called giga churches, evidently. I didn't know that. Giga churches, and the largest of which number between thirty thousand and fifty thousand people.

These huge giga churches are led by such figures as Steven Furtick and Andy Stanley, Ed Young, Jr., Joel Osteen, Craig Groeschel of Life.Church. He does multisite megachurch, online church combo, and he bumps that number up over one hundred thousand people. All those identify themselves as Evangelical and identify whatever that thing is called online church as an Evangelical church. All told, Evangelical megachurches account for anywhere from 3.5 to 5 million of America's Evangelicals.

And as everything is kind of going online, I'm sure that number's going up and up.

In any community with a megachurch, I tell you, its influence is felt. Megachurches have a gravitational force in any community, and the sad thing is they present a false witness of what Christianity truly is. It's not the church, it's the parachurch wearing local church skin. So, it stands to reason that the institutional drift of today's Evangelicalism with no deep, theological foundation leads to doctrinal drift.

Building and maintaining parachurch organizations and megachurch institutions, that requires unity. It requires unity of mind and purpose, and a whole lot of money. So, everyone stays united, and donors are kept happy and giving when doctrinal and theological differences are minimized and ignored for the sake of mission, when nobody is confronted in their sin. Most megachurches are populated and even led by doctrinally immature people. So, Ephesians 4:14 says, They're "tossed to and fro by the waves, carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

You would be shocked at the level of doctrinal error and theological error in many of these churches, many of these institutions. Parachurch ministries, the megachurches, they embrace, I mean, frankly, godless enlightenment ideologies that are hostile to Christianity. They were set on a course from the very beginning to be hostile to Christianity. Sigmund Freud was no friend of the church, no friend of God. He rejected all that. So, many churches are practicing godless psychology in their churches.

All of it is proffering this godless psychology that comes from Sigmund Freud and his ilk that hate Christianity altogether. They see no place for God, the Bible, truth. They don't see sin. They don't even acknowledge an immaterial part of the self. All they say that matters is atoms and material self. How can they get the truth if they reject it all, they reject even the, the problem, understanding that sin is the issue? This is rationalism that comes out of the enlightenment.

Many today have rejected that, and they embrace the mysticism; go on the other side. They let the pendulum swing to the other side and embrace the mysticism of the charismatic movement, getting out of one ditch only to jump into another. Because all of that, whether it's rationalism on one side, or mysticism on the other, all of it is an attack on the absolute authority and complete sufficiency of Scripture.

No wonder godless ideologies like critical race theory, cultural Marxism, post-modernism, woke-ism, feminism, now LGBTQ-ism, all these godless ideologies have infiltrated churches like Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, Matt Chandler's Village Church, David Platt's McLean Bible Church. All of these have been infiltrated by false doctrines, godless ideologies. They've infiltrated parachurch organizations like CRU, other campus ministries. They've all come crumbling down, been taken over by this woke narrative. It's even infiltrated the Southern Baptist Convention as well.

This doctrinal drift means that Evangelicalism cannot deal, then, with the ethical challenges, hitting the Evangelical coastline in waves of increasing frequency and severity; the

ethical challenges. There was an investigative report by the *Houston Chronicle* in 2019 and it revealed widespread clergy sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Victim advocate, Rachel Denhollander, went on the warpath, and she says, "Churches can't be trusted anymore to deal with complex legal matters. They should come under the judgement of parachurch legal organizations and victim advocacy organizations from the top, looking in and calling them to account." Listen, if the SBC cannot or will not deal righteously with its newly elected president, Ed Litton, for his lack of Christian integrity, that is to say he flagrantly plagiarized sermons from other preachers for years, if they can't deal with that, well then maybe Denhollander isn't too off-base, at least about the institutional form of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Churches of Jesus Christ operating in obedience to the Word of God, practicing biblical church membership, church discipline, actually shepherding its people, listen, they don't need the services of victim advocacy advocates and legal services, whether from Denhollander or anybody else. They know the saints will judge the world, 1 Corinthians 6, even angels.



They're competent to handle these matters, sticking to the Word of God. They're informed by the truth. They understand law and Gospel. True churches are competent to handle these moral and ethical challenges that keep coming with rapidity in our day.

But the Evangelical parachurch, the Evangelical megachurch, multisite church, online internet church, though they hold that same Bible in their hands, and though they profess the same Jesus, they are ignorant in matters of law and Gospel because they do not fear God. It leaves them hopelessly encumbered by ethical confusion, therefore subject to the godless injustice of the world.

This Leads to a political way of dealing with the church, a political way of dealing with moral and ethical issues. The larger the megachurch, the larger the parachurch, they have a, too big to fail, mentality about their organization. Too many interested parties with too much to lose: jobs, salaries, donors, donations, brand, reputation; too much to lose.

So, since megachurch and parachurch bureaucracies, since they cannot deal with these challenges biblically and theologically, since they are biblically unqualified and ethically incompetent, and I don't mean that as an insult, it's just a fact, they are not competent to handle these ethical matters. They are ill-equipped to deal with them righteously. So, they do what they know. They default to what they know and understand, which is a worldly way of dealing with issues. They use worldly wisdom and worldly methodologies to deal with these problems that are coming to them that are inherently spiritual.

So, they protect the brand, they do damage control, they manage the situation for the best post-crisis, corporate benefit. Those with shared political interests, they affirm one another, flatter each other, pat each other on the back, protect each other's brand and reputation. There's no open criticism, no instruction for the sheep, no concern that they learn from a bad decision, learn from sin in their midst. It's about political survival, it's about protecting the brand.

It's a political force. Evangelicalism, as it becomes a political force, it will join forces with those political voices

because it wants to protect its interests and it sees us as harmful, and they'll join our persecutors. There's a famous C.S. Lewis quote that comes to mind. I've seen it bandied about the internet a little bit, "Those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience." That's a scary place to be, because Evangelicals politicized, they will torment us for our own good with the approval of their own conscience, thinking they're on the righteous side of the issue.

That, folks, in my estimation, is what Evangelicalism has become. It has drifted far from the old Evangelicalism. It's so far, it's unrecognizable from the old Evangelicalism. That which was biblically faithful, doctrinally robust and sound, Gospel driven, far from it. In its most visible, public representations, it has become a mongrel religion. It goes by the name Evangelical, but it doesn't know the evangel anymore. Much of it is drifting apostate, if not already apostate.