

The need for a Modern Reformation, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

I grew up in a Christian home and I was raised by faithful Christian parents, but I was not a Christian until God saved me in about my twentieth year before I turned 20. My growing up years were in the 1970s and 1980s. I was living and playing in suburbia with all of its money and fun and allurements.

And so the youth group that I grew up in and attended was facing the serious, very serious challenge of trying to attract well-entertained teenagers like me. And trying to gain and keep our interest, which is very difficult to do. Hoping that some of us would become, as they always put it back then, sold out for Jesus. In my life and the lives of many of those teenagers, the world and what it offered won out over the church. It was far more attractive and far more alluring and had a far stronger appeal, tapping into my unregenerate heart than anything the church could offer.

I wanted to have fun and the world, and all its potential was on offer, and I hoped to find fame, fortune, significance,

satisfaction, whatever it is, in, in joining the military and going on those missions and fulfilling those achievements. It was a surprising grace of God that visited me early in my military service. I became a Christian early on in my time in the military. And very soon after my conversion, I began to notice how much of what I had enjoyed as a non-Christian, what it allured and enticed me as an unbeliever, while it still tempted me, I could tell that all the gifts and the offerings of the modern world that I grew up in, they were very powerful, very influential, but I could see them as something I need to make war with, something I need to oppose.

In my early months as a Christian, I loved going to church. I loved hearing the Scripture preached, read, sung. I loved being with fellow-believers. I, I listened out for whatever comported with my Bible reading. Things like the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin, the need to repent of it, the holiness of God's people, the need to aspire to live a holy life, all that my activity about evangelizing the lost and following Christ in obedience. These are things I listened out for in the preaching from the pulpit. And whenever I heard those themes come out, my heart lifted. I had to find them, honestly, through many of the stories that were being told, many of the anecdotes that were delivered. The preachers, what he did in the

past week or whatever, that I kind of let that go by, but I was looking for those things that comported what I read in Scripture.

At the time, as a brand-new Christian, I am still sorely tempted by the world and still tempted to live for myself and as I was in that church for a number of months before I was deployed, I found out that there were other professing Christians in that church that were struggling with those things, as well, especially in my age group. But none of them were talking about it. The longer I was around these professing, church-going young Christians, the more I could see that the God-talk and the external righteousness was somewhat of a façade, just a veneer of spiritually.

In reality, many of these young people were living for the world, loving the world. And except for attending church on Sundays and maybe some youth events or student ministries' events, they were busy during the week fulfilling all the same desires and pursuing the same ambitions and living by the same priorities as pretty much everybody else. They could quote Bible verses, very good ones, too. They, the verses they quoted seemed to have really no effect on their desires, no effect, no ability to shape or control them. They held no sway over their wills,

over their ambitions and behaviors. So these people that I was around in the church, from reputation, a very healthy church, well-known church. These people talked about God. They quoted the Bible. They expressed a desire for holiness, but it's very difficult to see how they were really taking any of that seriously.

So God took me away from that environment for a time as I deployed to the first Gulf War. During that deployment, I was immersed in Scripture. I was devouring the truth and studying Romans and Ephesians and Acts. And I read the Bible from cover to cover for the very first time in my life. And when I returned from the Gulf War and went back to my church, things had gotten a lot worse there. And as I reflect on it, actually, nothing had changed at that church, it's just I had changed.

And I came back into it and just saw more. It seemed that all of a sudden, the things I was saying to them in my understanding of Scripture the truths that I was rejoicing in out loud in their presence. The doctrines that I was so grateful for. I began to be rebuked by other Christians for what I was saying, suspected for making people feel uncomfortable. Talking about such things as sin and holiness and righteousness and all the rest.

When I got out of the military and returned home to attend the church I was raised in here in Colorado, the rebukes became more stern. And the level of suspicion became more grave and more, people were more concerned. **S**ome of the older Christians, the leaders, thought I needed some pretty serious reprogramming. For example, there were professing Christians who became upset when I spoke about the sovereignty of God. And particularly when speaking about the sovereignty of God in electing a people for himself, choosing them for salvation. That made people really angry. I didn't understand. It was a freeing doctrine to me. I rejoiced in it because I could see clearly in what Romans 1 through 3 said about myself. You're a sinner, Travis. You're dead in sin. There's no way you could elevate yourself to turn one eye upward toward God. I was like, that's me. That's clear.

It's going to take something great, some miraculous power beyond me. And I read in Romans, of course, it's the electing grace of God. He takes the initiative. He's sovereign. I rejoiced in that. Many of the Christians around me were angry about that doctrine. That was disappointing to me. Growing up in church, that church, and coming back to it, and now as a Christian. Several people tried to disabuse me of the notion that God created the world in six literal days because, duh, science has disproven that. Get on board with science.

Everyone seemed to be really, really alarmed that I saw the Holy Spirit working in and through the Word as all sufficient to help us repent of sin and to actually change with no help whatsoever from psychology. Many people called me naïve and simplistic to think that Christ would grow his church according to his will and his timing simply by teaching the Scripture and teaching its theology, shepherding people toward holy living, confronting sin, dealing with sin. They pointed, instead, to models in emerging mega churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback as the, really the new models for church growth. Follow corporate models for business growth, do brand recognition and all the rest and you have instant success. All these new ways were about appealing to a nation of consumers, to attract unchurched Harry and Mary, go after the young urban professionals who were tired of traditional church.

So the method is you go into the suburban, nobody did this in the rural areas. Nobody did this in really poverty-stricken areas. They went to suburbia. They went to where the wealth is and they sent surveys throughout these neighborhoods to find out what makes these yuppies feel comfortable, entice them with late-show style music programs, slick graphics, video presentations and deliver sermons in a non-preachy tone.

I was in the early-mid nineties just absolutely perplexed by all this. I couldn't figure out what is the disconnect that is between my Bible and what I'm seeing all around me. Why is it that I seemed to be, everywhere I go, I seem to be the odd man out? Professing Christians, many of them older, seemingly wiser than me purported pillars of the church, some were pastors and seminary professors. All them alike seemed to be in one or several ways giving the world way too much credit as if the world had something that we needed in the church.

They give the world way too much credit. And they still claimed, all the while, they still claimed to believe in an inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word of God. They preached it in the pulpit. They taught it in classes. But the way they lived their lives, the way they evangelized and disciplined, the way they actually tried to work on growing the church, all of that was following the world's script.

And so that sent me off on a pursuit of trying to figure out what was happening. Was I nuts? And, actually, it was such a joy and relief to discover John MacArthur on the radio. Because as I listened to him, I thought, well, there's somebody who I can understand. There's somebody who's making sense. They're actually explaining the Bible just simply going verse by verse.

Slowly, but surely through John MacArthur I found other avenues R.C. Sproul and other teachers.

I started to discover other books. I realized I'm not the only one thinking this. Or else, all of them are crazy just like I am so I'm in good company. I wanted to understand though why I would look down to read my Bible, which seemed so plain, so clear, so simple, so straight forward, and then I would look up to see all the methodologies of the world, things I'd been hearing in college and university classes, things I'd been seeing in the business world or marketing, all of it brought into the church, practiced in the church and then affirmed as wise and sophisticated and God-approved.

So I started reading books. I asked a lot of questions. I irritated a lot of people with my questions. I searched for answers. And eventually the Lord led me to the right books, then to the really old books where I found comradery. He led me to the right teachers and helped me to start making sense of all this. Unbeknownst to me at that time, at the same time I was personally experiencing all this confusion in the church, David Wells published a very important and as it turns out, a highly influential book called *No Place for Truth. No Place for Truth*,

it was published in 1993. It's a first in a series of four books.

But *No Place for Truth. God in the Wasteland* is the second book. *Losing Our Virtue* is the third book and *Above All Earthly Powers* is the fourth book. They're fantastic books. But the first book, *No Place for Truth*, it helped me at the time to crystalize what was at the heart of the issue. And the subtitle of *No Place for Truth* is *Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* What a good question. Whatever happened to evangelical theology? I'd been a Christian for ten years before I finally found a church that really rejoiced in evangelical theology. It was disappointing to have to wait so long. But I was so thankful when I go there.

No Place for Truth is a book that really indicted the evangelical church for abandoning its historical theological roots to become, instead, to become worldly, to become pragmatic, to chase outward success rather than inward faithfulness to God and his Word. As I said, Wells followed up that book in 1994 with *God in the Wasteland*. That developed further the argument that he was making in the first book about this process of secularization in the church through the influence of modernity. this issue of modernity and

modernization and secularization. And I don't want to get bogged down by unpacking the elements of that, but I do want to read one paragraph for you from *God in the Wasteland*.

Just to summarize David Wells' concern with what he sees in modernity. So *God in the Wasteland*. He says this, "Modernity," basically think modernity, think about all the technology and the communications technology and, and transportation developments that have happened in the past 100 years. And, you know, information technology started with the television and radio, television, airwaves, but then it's internet, it's phones, it's, I mean all this stuff has happened so quickly, so rapidly to just immerse our minds and take them away and modernize us. Which means, secularize us, make us think in secular categories about the world.

So Wells says this, "Modernity presents an interlocking system of values that has invaded and settled within the psyche of every person. Modernity is simply unprecedented in its power to remake human appetites, thinking processes, and values. It is, to put it in biblical terms, the worldliness of our time. For worldliness is that system of values and beliefs and behaviors and expectations in any given culture that have at

their center the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God.

“Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd. Modernity is worldliness and it has concealed its values so adroitly in the abundance, the comfort, and the wizardry of our age that even those who call themselves the people of God seldom recognize them for what they are.” End quote.

The result of this process of modernity, modernization is to secularize the church. Modernity makes no overtly hostile attacks on the holiness of God and Christ and his church, which does happen. And we see that coming out of the new, new atheist movement and some of those corners of the internet. But modernity is far more subtle in its attacks and its influence. Instead of denying God outright, modernity makes him appear irrelevant, by taking all the things that we need and, in pre-modern times used to pray for, and making them abundantly available on the shelf of your local store.

How often do you pray, “Give me, Father, please, this day my daily bread,” and you’re talking about food? How often do you do that? When you run out of bread in the refrigerator, don’t you just go to the store? Or these days, order online and have

it brought to you? So modernity, it's subtle. It doesn't deny God outright. It makes God seem irrelevant, weightless. Instead of attacking the truth of Scripture, modernity makes Scripture appear quaint, outmoded, outdated. The modern world has really succeeded in choking out the transcendent to only make space for the worship of a false God made in its own image and its own likeness. And I've given, I've assigned that, I don't think I'm original to do this, but I've assigned that God the name, progress. The God of modernity is the God of progress.

So we're always looking ahead to how science is going to fix this ailment or that ailment or how the vaccine is going to do it for us. And then transportation, hey, I know we're running out of oil and so we're going to get electric and then we'll do energy through hydro-electric. So we've always got a solution. We're always looking to the future. Progress is going to solve it for us.

So the modern world has choked out the transcendent. It's taken our eyes from up and brought them back down to the earth so that we look at ourselves and we see a god made in our own image and our own likeness. And now having, for many, having surrendered to the modernization and the secularization of the world in every other sphere of life. Many professing Christians

have brought that same sense of defeat back into the local church, acting as if the church needs to surrender to this program as well, adopt these powerful forces and repurpose them for church purposes, for God's purposes.

So ever since their surrender, today's professing evangelicals have been building the church in the likeness of the modern world. And most have failed to stop and assess. Most have failed to expose the worldly assumptions that they've embraced. Evangelicalism has been very, very busy. It's been very, very active. It seems to be very large and successful. But it's been building worldly churches, worldly institutions. Parachurches, seminaries, colleges, worldly institutions and trying to reshape God in the image of modernism.

So it's time for us, as Christians, to repent and return to our first love. I started reading these books nearly 20 years ago and they have made a profound impact on my life and my thinking. At the time they were published, there were other men, again, unbeknownst to me, but other men reading them, too, evangelical leaders who had made the same observations, who had developed the same deep concerns about what they were seeing in their churches around them and evangelicalism as a movement. And they'd come to the same conclusions as David Wells had.

John MacArthur is one of them. He wrote this book, *Ashamed of the Gospel*. But John MacArthur makes the same case. I think he interacted with David Wells, as well, in that book. But he makes the same case, seeing that pragmatism and that worldliness and all that entering into church growth strategies, and he titled it *Ashamed of the Gospel, When the Church Becomes Like the World*. Its exactly the same point. Other church leaders led by James Montgomery Boice and Michael Horton, both of those men were deeply influenced by David Wells' books. They gathered together some other likeminded evangelical leaders around them to form the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, they still have a website. They still have lots of good content there. That alliance formed in 1995. They drafted and published a statement that's known as the *Cambridge Declaration* in 1996. But I want to read you the introductory paragraphs to that *Cambridge Declaration*.

"In the course of history words change. In our day this has happened to the word Evangelical." Now keep in mind, this is in 1996 and yet it sounds as fresh and relevant today as when it was written 25 years ago. "In the course of history words change. In our day this has happened to the word Evangelical. In the past it served as a bond of unity between Christians from a wide diversity of church traditions. Historic evangelicalism was

confessional. It embraced the essential truths of Christianity as those were defined by the great ecumenical councils of the church. In addition, evangelicals also shared a common heritage in the Solas of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation.

"Today the light of the Reformation has been significantly dimmed. The consequences that the word Evangelical has become so inclusive as to have lost its meaning. We face the peril of losing the unity it has taken centuries to achieve. Because of this crisis and because of our love for Christ, his Gospel, and his church, we endeavor to assert anew our commitment to the central truths of the Reformation and a historic evangelicalism. These truths we affirm not because of their role in our traditions, but because we believe that they are central to the Bible."

We summarize that in what we've been saying in another way. We can just say this, that evangelical church has become worldly. It has succumbed to worldliness and by worldliness, we're not primarily referring to the sins that were decried once by the fundamentalists, like drinking smoking, various forms of sexual immorality, all that stuff. The evangelical church has become worldly in another way, maybe more deeply and more subtle by embracing the thinking and the practices of the world.

Now that evangelicalism has, for the most part, been overtaken by this worldliness of our time, which takes the shape of modernity, which has bowed to the powerful processes of secularization. David Wells puts it this way, *God in the Wasteland*, he says, "The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization or antiquated music. And those who want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to staunch the flow of blood that's spilling from its true wounds.

"The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church." That is a million-dollar statement. "God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant. His grace is too ordinary. His judgment is too benign. His Gospel is too easy. And his Christ is too common." End Quote. So it's time for us, as Christians, to repent and return to our first love.