



The need for a Modern Reformation, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

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.

In *No Place for Truth*, David Wells laments what he had been observing for over 25 years, from 1970 to 1995. He's been observing, over that time period, the effectiveness of modernity in overtaking and insinuating itself into the church. He says, quote, "I watched with growing disbelief as the evangelical church has cheerfully plunged into astounding theological illiteracy." End Quote.

Later he writes this, "There can be little doubt that if the capacity to think Christianly about this world is eroding in the churches, so, too, will the propriety of doing theology, both in the pulpit and in the academy. The propriety of this kind of knowledge will disintegrate as certainly as would the propriety of a novelist continuing to work when it was

discovered that the culture in which he or she was living had gradually lost the ability to read.” End Quote.

Sometimes I’m concerned when I see Christians, when I say, turn to whatever Scripture, and they pull out their phone and they scroll to find it. I think we’re becoming more and more of a visually oriented culture. People are communicating now more and more with visual images and pictures and it’s becoming more and more of a visual society. So what happens when people lose the desire to read? What happens when they are intimidated by picking up a book? When, because they’ve been doing what I call Google reading, you know, scanning the page and grabbing your key words and then kind of move, find that for the paper that you’re writing, stick it in there and then kind of move on. That’s called Google reading.

What happens when that becomes the pattern of your thinking? It’s so hard to break that pattern and get into what one author calls deep reading. We need to get into deep reading. Our souls depend on it. James Boice, making the same observations over the same time period as David Wells. And reflecting from his vantage point on Wells’ question, “Whatever happened to evangelical theology?” Boice proffers an answer. He says, “That evangelicals have pursued the world’s wisdom.

They've embraced the world's theology. They've followed the world's agenda and they've employed the world's methods. So they've pursued the world's wisdom, embraced the world's theology, followed the world's agenda, and employed the world's methods."

I'll walk through each of those things just ever so briefly. But first Boice says the evangelical church has been guilty of following the world's wisdom. We've kind of become like Israel that pined after the Canaanites, always looking down the hill, always looking at those Canaanite cities and how cool everything seemed there over at the beach. So they wanted to go down to the Philistine areas and kind of be like them. They said to Samuel, "Give us a king like the other nations around us," rejecting God as their king.

And the church has become like that seeming to feel this constant yearning for the world's approval and the world's acceptance. So though we profess to hold the Bible as inerrant, authoritative, all-sufficient Word of the living God, the church has repeatedly turned away from listening to God's wisdom to listen to the world's wisdom. And in doing that, the church has nullified God's Word, not by attacking it, but just by setting

it aside. Not by denying it, but by treating it as insufficient. In spite of what the church has professed.

One way this happens is when professing Christians dabble in or maybe embrace wholly and uncritically the study of psychology and psychiatry and does whatever the medical professional prescribe even, even if it comes from a worldview that marginalizes and denies God. That's where psychology came from, by the way, through the Renaissance Enlightenment thinking that said, "There is no God. There is no supernatural reality. There is no immaterial part of man. Everything is atoms. Everything is material."

And yet, their left with humans and their problems. Aren't they? They still have crime to deal with. They still have aberrant thinking and aberrant behavior. And so what do they do? Psychologists and psychiatrists find a reason for existence, don't they? But they're treating the problem with, with none of the tools necessary to treat the problem. The problem is a spiritual problem, which they've denied. The problem is sin before a holy God, both of which they've denied.

Another way is how many churches utilized corporate marketing techniques, entertainment, all that to attract unbelievers and grow the church. They want those people coming

through the door to think their church is cool, relevant, with it, hip. All of that is just the world's wisdom, wanting to be accepted and approved by the world and so they succumb to the world's wisdom. A second way evangelicals have been guilty of becoming worldly is in following the world's theology. And even more today we see this in the churches following after this Woke-Social Justice movement. So we use biblical terms like sin and salvation. But many churches have gutted those terms of their biblical meanings and adopted worldly meanings for those same terms.

We claim the Bible tells us the way of salvation. But we come to the Bible wearing worldly lenses that really distort the real meaning of Scripture. We inject worldly meanings into biblical terms. So instead of using the Bible's terms and words that God revealed and wrote in Scripture, we adopt the world's language, which comes from the godless halls of the university. Many evangelicals are using the language of social liberation, all that nasty offspring of Marxist ideas. For many years, Christians have been using therapeutic language to speak about the human condition, sin is dysfunction, brokenness. Salvation is wholeness. It's a sense of well-being via therapy. Dr. Boice says the Bible becomes our self-help manual. Its stories are

entertaining moral tales showing us how to cope with our problems.

So many people still in the church especially still use sin, salvation, but by that they mean salvation means wholeness. It means well-being. It means peace of soul, peace of mind. Sin means something's not quite right with me. I'm ill at ease. But they don't think of sin in terms of the violating, transgressing God's law. So third, following the world's wisdom, learning the world's theology, evangelicals have been guilty of following the world's agenda. We claim our priorities are set by Scripture. That is evangelism, discipleship, but we've got to ask, do your calendars and checkbooks reflect those priorities? The world often intrudes because it's always asserting the priority of its own agenda.

So today's agenda de jour, racism, woke-ism, social justice, intersectionality. We've been seeing that crammed down our throats. We've also seen climate change, world hunger, green technology, poverty, housing inequities. So when the church listens to all that stuff and digests it, it's in danger of becoming the servant of the world. Saying that it's our job to see that through, to do it God's way and pursue all those Godless agendas.

So finally, having followed the world's wisdom, learned its theology, serving its agenda, the evangelical church has been guilty of employing the world's methods. We claim as evangelicals to trust in God to save and build and guide and direct by the Spirit of Christ, but we've resorted to worldly methods of attracting people to build the church. Evangelicals have embraced pragmatism as a suitable method to build churches. Do whatever works.

Church leaders have become marketers. They conduct surveys. They build brands. They've become accountants. They count everything: money, people, website hits, visits; they're fixated on money. They're attracting people through entertainment. They soft pedal the harder truths of the Gospel: sin and judgment. And they keep the people in the seats by entertainment and therapy. So all of this sounds so encouraging to us, doesn't it? No, it's not. It's rather discouraging, isn't it?

But this has been happening for the past 50 years. And it's important that we as a church are really aware of this, really aware of our recent history that is weakened so many of our evangelical institutions and so many formerly faithful churches. It is important that we do not proceed on the task of doing theology together as a church without any awareness of this

history because it affects everybody that we run into. So what's to be done about it? What can we do? And this is the really, really encouraging part. We can repent. We can join in repenting and recovering an historic evangelical faith.

The opening statement in the *Cambridge Declaration* says this, "Evangelical churches today are increasingly dominated by the spirit of this age rather than by the Spirit of Christ. As evangelicals, we call ourselves to repent of this sin and to recover the historic Christian faith."

It's encouraging. When we identify this departure from theology as sin, which it is, God has given us a book, he's told us, study me. Study this book. Know it. Meditate on it. Make it your delight day and night, like Psalm 1 says. There's theology. There's truth about God and his name that we need to embrace and understand. And when we've set that aside, that's called sin.

So if we identify that as the sin that it is, that's encouraging because we can confess it as such. And then we can ask forgiveness and God can forgive us. And then we can work out repentance by recovering what we have set aside. Okay. So, there are some who haven't grown up in all this, you know. They've become Christians without any understanding of this and so you

just join in, not having any of the history. You just join in recovering the historic evangelical faith.

For those of us, though, who have grown up in it and you know what I'm talking about, who've been living through this for decades and wondering what's wrong, what's going on. Why this disconnect between what I read in my Bible and what I'm seeing in the churches. We can maybe ask some hard questions about ourselves and say, how have I neglected to study and pursue and to think deeply and critically? What have I embraced? What have I accepted?

And to think through those things ourselves, but even as a church we could just say, okay, we don't want any of that old, moldy, last 50 years evangelicalism. We don't want that anymore. What we want is to return to that vibrant, historic evangelical faith that connects itself right back to the apostolic church, comes through the historic ecumenical statements, creeds, and confessions, right through the Protestant Reformation and its Solas and its doctrines of Grace. All that produced so much, and we are riding on and enjoying the privilege of, we can go back and recover that.

So this modern reformation, it really starts with us. It starts right here in our own church. We don't need to wait for

anybody else to start it. we can repent now, and we can strive to recover the high and holy privilege that Christ has secured for us by his life and death and resurrection. He secured for us access to God. So we can study Scripture. We can study the theology of Scripture together that we might know and worship the living God. David said repeatedly in Psalm 119, here's verse 97, "O, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day." He said this in Psalm 119:162 and following, "I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. I hate and abhor falsehood," which is what modernity and secularization and everything that has insinuated into our churches.

So, "I hate and abhor that, but I love your law. Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules. Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble." What joy. There's joy in studying theology when we follow those first verses of Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in," what? "The law of the Lord and on his law, he meditates day and night."

So the more we saturate our minds with Scripture, the more our minds are renewed, the more we're going to think differently. The more we're going to think critically. Or as

Wells put it, the more we think Christianly about the world. Let's think Christianly together as a church. So what we need to develop is a habit of suspicion about the world we live in, about the worldly people that we come into contact with. I don't say treat them like enemies. They're the mission field. But don't embrace or swallow their philosophies. Don't be enamored with their approval. Don't seek it. They need what you have; you don't need what they have. They need the approval of our God. We don't need their approval.

So we need to develop a habit of suspicion about the world that we live in, the people who are teaching it, all its wisdom, its theology, its agendas, its methodologies. We can't trust it and we must think critically about it. We've got to be discerning Christians. Whenever we detect our own compromise, or perhaps someone lovingly exposes compromise to us, we need to repent of that sin.

And the way we work out our repentance is in a continual habitual lifelong pursuit to recover the historical evangelical faith in our own church, in our own place, in our own time. And work to see that spread in our own region. So how do we do that? By honoring God's Word as God's Word, for what it is, the holy revealed written Word of God.

We do that by studying its doctrines, learning from the historic ecumenical creeds, the Protestant Reformation confessions, and by proclaiming this, by broadcasting it, by telling everybody about it. That's how we honor the word of God. In the *Cambridge Declaration*, under the heading *Sola Scriptura*, it begins to address the problem that we're pointing to, pointing to the erosion of biblical authority in, in much of what we call evangelism. Evangelicals still claim to be people of the book, biblical Christians. Many of them will still affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, but in practice, as we're saying, in practice, the authority of Scripture has faded. God's Word rests lightly on their consciences, if at all. Just really, it's like back in the book of the Judges. Every man doing what's right in his own eyes.

I see this all the time. It's very sad. And so many are no longer practicing what they say they believe. They still belong to the church; they still affirm the church's doctrinal statements. They say, yeah, I believe that. That's totally what I believe. But then you see that they practice something completely different. So here's what the *Cambridge Declaration* says about Scripture. "Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the church's life. But the evangelical church today has separated Scripture from its authoritative function. In

practice, the church is guided far too often by the culture. Therapeutic technique, marketing strategies and the beat of the entertainment world, often have far more to say what the church wants, how it functions and what it offers than does the Word of God.

"Pastors have neglected their rightful oversight of worship, including the doctrinal content of the music. As biblical authority has been abandoned in practice, as its truths have faded from Christian consciousness, and as its doctrines have lost their saliency, the church has been increasingly emptied of its integrity, moral authority and direction. Rather than adapting Christian faith to satisfy the felt needs of consumers, we must proclaim the law as the only measure of true righteousness and the Gospel as the only announcement of saving truth. Biblical truth is indispensable to the church's understanding, nurture, and discipline. Scripture must take us beyond our perceived needs to our real needs and liberate us from seeing ourselves through seductive images, clichés promises and priorities of mass culture.

"It is only in the light of God's truth that we understand ourselves aright and see God's provision for our need. The Bible, therefore, must be taught and preached in the church.

Sermons must be expositions of the Bible and its teachings, not expressions of the preachers' opinions or the ideas of the age. We must settle for nothing less than what God has given. The work of the Holy Spirit in personal experience cannot be disengaged from Scripture. The Spirit does not speak in ways that are independent of Scripture. Apart from Scripture we would have never have known of God's grace in Christ. The Biblical Word, rather than spiritual experience is the test of truth." End quote.

Folks, when we give ourselves to honoring God's Word, God will lift us up. He honors those who honor his Word. Again as David Wells says "So to be the church in this way as a reforming church, recovering the historical evangelical faith to be the church in this way, the church is going to have to find in the coming generation leaders who exemplify this hope for its future and who will devote themselves to seeing it realized to lead the church in the way that it needs to be led, they will have to rise above the internal politics of the evangelical world and refuse to accept the status quo where that no longer serves the vital interests of the kingdom of God. They will have to decline to spend themselves in the building of their own private kingdoms and refuse to be intimidated into giving the church less and other than what it needs.

"Instead, they will have to begin to build afresh, in cogently biblical ways among the decaying structures that now clutter the evangelical landscape. To succeed, they will have to be people of large vision, people of courage, people who have learned again what it means to live by the Word of God, and most importantly, what it means to live before the holy God of that Word. Can this happen? I believe it can, but not until these leaders have successfully accomplished two major projects. First, the church is going to have to learn how to detect worldliness and make a clear decision to be weaned from it."

"Second, the church is going to have to get much more serious about itself, cease to be a supermarket serving the needs of religious consumers and become instead a force of counter cultural spirituality that draws from the interconnected lives of its members as expressed through their love, service, worship, understanding and proclamation. That is a tall order for the tempo and organization of the modern world which exacts a heavy toll on all who attempt to keep pace with it, clearly mitigate against it happening."

But it can happen. When we give ourselves to honoring God and his Word by preaching and teaching his Word by hearing and obeying his Word, then we will develop a taste for theology.

There will be a growing longing in our hearts to know more and more deeply this God who has saved us. Again, as David Wells says, "A God with whom we are on such easy terms and whose reality is little different from our own, a God who is merely there to satisfy our needs has no real authority to compel and will soon begin to bore us." Man, that's the God that I've heard preached for many years in many other churches. Our God, the God of Scripture, never bores. His holiness compels us to come and bow and worship.

So we need to reassert the transcendence of God, teach the incomparable holiness of God and that comes by the pursuit of studying theology so we can gain the knowledge of the holy, so that we can bow in adoring worship. We need to continue to identify and keep returning to drink from those two streams I mentioned that produce the evangelicalism that we stand on the shoulders of. Those two streams, as I mentioned, are the ecumenical creeds of the early church and the Solas of the Protestant Reformation. We need to recover the Word of God in our pulpits, in our thinking, in our conversation, really in our hearts.