

BOOK REVIEW

No Place for Truth: or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?

David F. Wells

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Reviewed by Ronald Hanko

David F. Wells' answer to the question posed in the title of his book is that evangelical theology no longer exists, to the ruin of modern evangelicalism. According to him, evangelicalism today has "no place for truth." He is intent, therefore, on probing the reasons for this and calling evangelicals back to their theological roots.

We believe that Wells has gone to the heart of the problem in this scathing indictment, and have therefore decided to review the book in spite of the fact that it was not given as a review copy. The book is a "must read" for every evangelical pastor and leader and for those laymen who have the courage and perseverance to tackle a book this large. We are offering this review, then, in order to bring the book to the attention of those who are not aware of it.

The book is also very well written and worth reading simply for the many pithy remarks Wells makes by way of condemning tendencies of evangelicalism. We can only offer a few representative samples.

In condemning the loss of doctrine and truth by evangelicals, Wells says, for example, "Whatever follies the Marxists committed - and their follies and wickedness have been manifold - they always had the wisdom to know that if they yielded their worldview, they yielded their reason for existence. Evangelicals are not quite so wise" (p. 136).

Again, he points out that "What is now in place is not exactly an alternative system of belief. What is in place is no system of belief at all. . . . It's essence is not right doctrine, values, and behavior; its essence is the freedom to have no doctrines, no values, to be free to follow the stream of instinct that flows from the self wherever it may lead, a point that the evangelical apologists for this approach advocate quite unabashedly and unselfconsciously" (pp. 169, 170). Thus, "stripped of doctrinal substance and rendered unreflective about and uncritical of the culture, theology now transforms 'virtue' into a set of everyday skills for finding success in a world of technology and affluence" (p. 112).

Speaking of evangelical leaders, Wells says: "In the evangelical world, there are many organizers and many managers but only a very few leaders. There are only a few because there can be no leadership without a vision, and the ability to see is now in very scarce supply. And seeing is what theology is all about" (p. 217).

The problem, he says, is that: "they lead by holding aloft moist fingers to sense the changes in the wind. In all this they show themselves to be different indeed from the One who embodied what servanthood was intended to be and who never once tailored his teaching to what he judged the popular reception of it would be" (p. 215).

Regarding the people themselves he can be equally biting: "Being evangelical has come to mean simply that one has had a certain kind of religious experience that gives color to the private aspects of daily life, but in which few identifiable theological elements can be discerned or, as it

turns out, are necessary.” “It is enough for them,” he says, “simply to know that Christ somehow died for people” (p. 131).

Regarding the usual evangelical formula for success, that is, revival, revival, and more revival, Wells states: “We need reformation rather than revival. The habits of the modern world, now so ubiquitous in the evangelical world, need to be put to death, not given new life. They need to be rooted out, not papered over with fresh religious enthusiasm” (p. 301).

There is much other excellent material in the book. The few pages on the relationship between theology and the church are themselves worth the price of the book. Wells says there: “A theology oblivious to the Church as the people of God soon loses a sense of wonder because it is cut off from worship, and it soon loses productive connections to the world because it is not driven by a commitment to service” (p. 292). How true! The little serious theology that is done today is usually done by theologians for theologians and is entirely divorced from the life and walk of God’s people. It is of very little value, therefore.

The one point where we differ from Wells has to do with the reason for this decline in truth and theology. He traces the cause entirely to the pressures of modern society: “The emptiness of evangelical faith without theology echoes the emptiness of modern life” (p. 301). While this is partly true, it is not the only reason, we are convinced.

For one thing, there has been a deliberate abandonment of truth on the part of evangelicals, usually for the sake of unity. An example of this is found in the little book of Lloyd-Jones, **What is an Evangelical?** In this book, Lloyd-Jones calls the doctrines of election and predestination, the age and mode of baptism, church government, millennialism, the way of sanctification, and the question of the charismatic gifts “non-essential” and comes perilously close to contradicting the doctrine of Scripture (Banner of Truth Trust, 1992, pp. 86-90). Indeed, there are only four doctrines that Lloyd-Jones lists as essential.

The book also shows that this is all in the interests of evangelical unity, yet with a notable lack of success. In spite of the fact that Lloyd-Jones himself was better at this point in practice than in theory (he himself, especially on such matters as predestination and the way of sanctification had clear views which he preached and taught), his influence is at least partly to blame for the loss of theology in present-day evangelicalism. Nor has it produced evangelical unity. If anything it has undermined such unity, as Wells predicts. “In the absence of conviction,” he says, “all belief collapses, even belief in unity” (p. 132).

So too, this abandonment of truth has come about through the efforts of so many evangelical leaders and theologians to teach and maintain a theology that is a mass of contradictions and paradoxes - a theology, in other words, that is unsystematic. This, perhaps more than anything else, has sown the seeds of the demise of evangelical theology. What does not “hold together” will most certainly fall apart.

With that caveat, this is a book that must be noted and read. We are certain, however, that most of evangelicalism will pay little or no attention to what Wells has said. It is easier to be “at ease in Zion” than to seek truth.