

REVIEW ARTICLE

No Place for Truth

Reviewed by
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No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? by David F. Wells. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 319 pp., \$16.00.

David F. Wells, professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and author of *No Place For Truth*, subtitled *Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*, gives a clarion call to the evangelical world for a reformation, vis-à-vis revival, of the present historical church back to the systematic, doctrinal understanding and propagation of the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Admittedly, Wells writes from a non-fundamentalist position criticizing his own peers and the evangelical movement of which he is part. His central purpose is to explore why theology is disappearing. His central plea is “for a new kind of evangelical,” much more like the “old kind used to be” (p. 13).

Making certain he does not drift into fundamentalist terminology, Wells describes the “old kind” of evangelical in terms of the Puritan Congregationalist of Wenham, MA. Wenham, the hometown of Adoniram Judson, typifies the theological and subsequent cultural changes in the Christian landscape of American evangelicalism. He carefully chronicles the unholy transformation of this “delicious paradise” to one that is “lost” and beyond recovery—a “fool’s paradise.” One of the notable contributors to Wenham’s demise was an incipient and “all pervasive” Arminianism that rose out of the Enlightenment and coincided with the democratic mood in the country (p. 32). Wells points out that Charles Finney, more than any other, supplanted the Reformation preaching of Jonathan Edwards, which produced the only theologically sound revival in America affecting the country positively for 150 years. Finney’s revivalism in response to the so-called “dead orthodoxy” of Calvinistic churches began a process of ever-declining doctrinal emphasis

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which characterizes evangelicalism's bankruptcy of truth today. This young and theologically untaught legal apprentice emphasized human autonomy vis-à-vis God's sovereignty; that skewed idea merged neatly into the current political slogans of the post-enlightenment age such as, "let freedom ring." The ubiquitous slogan sounded throughout the land in all human endeavors, ranging from politics to science, to religion. Nothing would be withheld from man's ever inquiring mind. Absolutes dissolved, and many cultural manifestations of permanence disappeared due to a theological system which allowed man's intellect to become the ultimate reference point for truth.

Wells astutely analyzes the effects of diminishing theology on culture at large, as well as modern culture's reciprocal effect upon theology. The death of Western culture which began in the mid-nineteenth century, was replaced by a machine age of technology, and forever sealed the destruction of a world characterized by Western morality. Solzhenitsyn described modernity as "Our Time," an age split between the values of the West and those of modern materialism and brought upon by a corrupted intelligentsia who eliminated the concept of authority, resulting in theological nihilism. "Our Time" is characterized by the rejection of all external authorities and a compulsive desire to relinquish our present age from the past. We are, says Wells, *post-Christian*, *post-puritan*, *post-industrial*, etc. We live in a day when ideas do not matter (p. 60). Instead, blind and irrational forces order the day. This is the spirit of the evangelical world, according to Wells, which has conformed itself to the spirit of the age in which we live and has sacrilegiously hastened its corruption by a subjective, non-theological, humanistic handling of God's objective, inscripturated truth.

The author unfortunately stresses modernity/modernization, along with secularism/secularization, over against human depravity. Wells states, "Modernity is the consequence of modernization, as secularism is the consequence of secularization" (p. 72). He also states, "It is the social climate that, as we shall see, creates problems for unbelief" (p. 79). This is true as far as it goes. Wells, however, neglects to lay out the theological bases in particular for modernity and secularism. With such cause/effect arguments laid solely at the feet of modernity, one receives the impression of a behavioristic world view. Nevertheless, since human corruption is furthered by an environment increasingly absent of common grace, Wells's arguments of the secularized church via modernity are helpful in establishing his premise that the church is most hesitant to let its theological "slip" show, if it even prefers to wear one.

Additionally, the reader must piece together the varied descriptions of modernity and form his own definition. Wells characterizes the modern secular age as urban, driven by capitalism, fueled by technological innovation, and unfriendly to religion. Later he describes modernity

as the “public environment largely created by urbanization, the moral etiquette, style of thought...shaped by the large, impersonal structures” (p. 74). This new world creates two spheres of life, both public and private.

“Public life” molded by modernism serves as a “lubricant” hastening the passage of new values and a pluralism which reduces all values to the lowest common denominator. He concludes that any theology which ignores the influence of modernity on evangelicalism is at best irrelevant (p. 73). Why, however, does Wells ignore for the most part the root of these problems and make little attempt to correlate modernity with the desires of the carnal nature, the permanent characteristics of worldliness, or Satan himself? His conclusion, nevertheless, sends a needed message: Much of what calls itself “Christianity” today is nothing more than “secular religiosity” and “secular evangelicalism” restructured by modern secularism with the permission of vast numbers of evangelical pastors, professors, and laymen (p. 79).

Having established the forces that have shaken the theological foundations, Wells endeavors to prove the disappearance of theology from the life of the church. Such a disappearance, he says, is “hard to miss but...not easy to prove” (p. 95). The author properly contends that theology should mean the same thing in the church and the academy with three essential aspects: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of virtues grounded in the first two elements (p. 98). The confessional element comprises the *sine qua non* of theology. Unfortunately, Wells does not address what hermeneutical approach is necessary in assembling a systematic, unitary, non-contradictory body of truth from the Scriptures (p. 99). Of greater concern, Wells tends to equate Protestant and Catholic theology even to the point of giving positive comments on Catholic authoritarianism without clearly delineating Rome’s multiple heresies. He compliments Romanist theology for having a better intellectual understanding of what it means to be the recipient of God’s Word. “This,” says Wells, “has at times been a significant weakness in Protestant theology, as compared with Catholic” (pp. 99–100). Again, Wells quotes Roman Catholic modernist, George Tyrell, for the sake of Tyrell’s negative comments regarding Romanists’ implacable hold on their ancient dogma. Such reasoning links Catholicism and Protestantism in tandem with one another as “the old faith” in opposition to a new “synthesis” between modernity and faith (p. 116). Few qualifications appear in the near context to properly distinguish the gulf-like differences between truth and error among the two systems of theology. Summarily, Wells equivocates between Catholicism and Protestant theology by placing them on an equal continuum. He mentions that evangelical reactions to modernization have caused some to recoil into Anglo-Catholicism on account of subjective

pietism, and, on the other extreme, others have taken their stand on the “verities of old time Fundamentalism” in response to evangelical softness (p. 128). He concludes that in between these shores most evangelicals are endeavoring to find their way through the choppy waters of modernity (p. 128). This odd polarization that places Romanism and fundamentalism equi-distant from modernity does a great disservice to the theological error that rests on the Romanist side.

Surprisingly, Wells treats fundamentalism with a measure of respect. He recognizes that fundamentalists are the real forbears of evangelicals who used doctrine to define their beliefs and relationship to a hostile world. Fundamentalism, says Wells, has always had a spirit of embattlement against the naturalistic age due to its cognitive understanding of doctrine (pp. 128–29). Though the author never personally identifies with the fundamentalists, he admires them for their spirit to remain a counter-culture. “The great sin in Fundamentalism” says Wells, “is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow” (p. 129). From this point, Wells launches into a scathing review of modern evangelicalism.

The new modernism of evangelicalism is a unique blend of American individualism/conformity with theology resulting in the religious “self-movement” and is appropriately titled “self-piety.” Evangelicals have failed to recognize this shift from objective to subjective truth and the destructive power it has over the historic faith. Truth now comes by intuition and feeling rather than ascertaining God’s viewpoint on any given fact. “I feel” rather than “I know” is the frequent response of a Christian to theologically relevant questions. The result is a loss of authority, accountability, and duty—all replaced by human autonomy, utility, and the false idea that “being good” means “feeling good,” which turns into a lethal view of American happiness.

Evangelicalism has revised the world’s self-addiction and baptized it with proof texts and religious terminology. The Arminian orientation of this theological age reveals the nakedness of a wholly inadequate doctrinal base to sustain spiritual sanity when faced by an unrelenting offering of media sacrifices designed to conform man to a self-absorbed, humanistic mind-set. Wells illustrates the above in his statement, “It is only the hungry, after all, who are always thinking of food; those who are not deprived occupy themselves with other thought. It is only the unhappy who are constantly preoccupied with happiness, only those crippled by a sense of their own insubstantial self who expend their lives in its pursuit” (p. 172). Wells excoriates the “self-piety” movement as being so antithetical to truth by delineating the multiple heresies of Robert Schuller. Schuller, says Wells, “is by no means alone in this; he is simply the most shameless” (p. 175). Unlike most evangelicals, Wells has sufficient courage to name a multiplicity of books and periodicals who willingly

participate in the above theological deceptions, such as *Leadership* magazine and *Christianity Today*. There is, conspicuously, the absence of such popular names as Bill Gothard and Chuck Swindoll, who have in varying degrees contributed to the self-piety confusion. Perhaps bringing these popular “middle-of-the-road” speakers into question would subject Wells to considerable criticism. Yet the most influential, though less extreme, promoters of confusion must be dealt with. The average layman is more likely to be influenced by these personalities than the sources footnoted by Wells (pp. 175–79).

Continuing his argument on self-piety, Wells insightfully demonstrates the subsequent loss of proper ecclesiastical authority in evangelical circles. Rather than theology coming from God, a “democratized” faith exists in an environment where “every person’s intuitions” are granted equal value “extending a presumption of common insight to all” (p. 214). The “best pollster” makes the best pastor who “trims” his preaching within the “limits of popularly held ideas” which find their sanction and legitimacy in the audience. This sovereignty of evangelical sentiment emerges in the new buzz word, “servant leadership.” In this instance, Wells’s comments are compelling:

“Servant leadership”...has the ring of piety about it. But it is a false piety, for it plays on an understanding of servanthood that is antithetical to the biblical understanding. Contemporary servant leaders are typically individuals...whose convictions shift with the opinion to which they assiduously attune themselves, people who bow to the wishes of “the body” from whom their direction and standing derive...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. (pp. 214–215)

In light of Wells’s remarks, it is most distressing to hear this term ringing through the landscape of fundamentalism. Wells understands that no dichotomy necessarily exists between strongly-exercised Scriptural authority and Christ-like humility. It is a sad day when a new evangelical author shows more insight into the battle for truth than many fundamentalists who seem to be afraid of strong leadership.

The consumer-sovereignty idea, however baptized, has created substantial changes in the nature of and preparation for the ministry. Ministers in demand are now regarded as managers and psychologists who no longer need precise and thorough theological training. As “professionals” who cater to the worldly mind-set of what ministry should be, pastors have unwittingly produced a practical atheism in their congregants based on the assumption that truth for its own sake is neither relevant nor practical. Wells documents this shift by showing the expansion of the ministerial role from “Wenham’s Time” to “Our

Time” (pp. 233–236), the loss of interconnected truth in seminaries and colleges, and the emphasis on “specialization” in the ministry itself (p. 241). “We laugh,” says Wells, “at those who think theology is important, and then are shocked to find in our midst the superficial and unbelieving. We allow our pastors to be rendered sterile through their yearning for professionalization and then bid them to be fruitful in their work” (p. 247). Of course, the yearning for societal acceptance by ministers who abandon theology and thereby abandon truth has only increased the cynicism of the public.

In conclusion, Wells concisely contrasts the pagan mind of yesterday and today with the biblical mind he calls upon all to adhere to (pp. 259–270). He pleads for believers to have a historical-grammatical understanding of their faith and not to view the historical unfolding of the truth of God as either terrifying or worthless (p. 272). However, the author should follow his own invitations. In an inadvertent remark concerning the “Kingdom of God,” Wells carelessly says that the term takes on “fresh new meaning” in the Gospels and unwittingly divorces the nature of God’s Kingdom from its historical, revelational unfolding by the Old Testament writers (pp. 275–276). In addition, having seen the bankruptcy of new evangelicalism, one wonders why Wells does not call upon his readers to obey God’s Word to separate from ecclesiastical union with willful and habitual disobedience, not to mention heretical unbelief. Without such a call for personal and ecclesiastical separation, Wells reveals that he himself has been affected by the very error he seeks to expose.

Wells postpones giving a detailed solution to the theological abandonment until his next book, but now offers a renewed vision of God as a solution to the present doctrinal morass in evangelicalism which can scarcely be defined any longer due to its ever-increasing breadth and decreasing depth (p. 291). He also suggests that radical reformation rather than revival is needed to cure the cancer eating away the paper-thin piety which passes for godliness today (p. 292). “Revival” certainly can not put life into that which is essentially dead. Nor can reformation renovate apostasy. From Wells’s analysis of modern-day evangelicalism, it would appear that the movement is headed toward the apostate modernism against which our fundamental forefathers valiantly stood at great personal cost. Wells’s book in the hands of a historic fundamentalist should give ample information to challenge the voices of compromise in fundamentalism presently calling for a “kinder, gentler” fundamentalism. Such a mentality will not carry the day in the hour of battle. It lacks the militancy necessary to promote the truth, expose error, and separate from those promoting error.