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Missions at Risk—A Failure of Nerve

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Just as doors of opportunity are opening around the world, the Church seems to be losing its voice. A virtual re-paganization of Western culture is occurring, indicating that the failure of the American Church is evident at home as well as abroad. What is the root issue?

At base, the issue is a failure of theological nerve—a devastating loss of biblical and doctrinal conviction. The result is retreat on the mission fields of the world and regression on the home front. Since the middle of the last century, the mainline Protestant denominations have been withdrawing from the missionary enterprise, some even declaring a “moratorium” on the sending of missionaries charged to preach the Gospel. Among these denominations, the total missionary force is now a fraction of that during the 1950s, and many of those who remain on the fields have been assigned duties far removed from conversionist witness.

This loss of theological nerve is a fundamental failure of conviction. Put bluntly, many who claim to be Christians simply do not believe that anyone is actually lost.

The essence of this belief is universalism, the belief that all persons will be saved, whether or not they have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Universalism presents itself in many forms, including modern inclusivism, pluralism, and relativism. In its boldest and most honest form, it is the absolute declaration that all persons will be saved (if indeed there is anything from which to be saved). By this account, all religions have an equal claim to truth which underlies the “religious” character of humanity.

In its more romanticized forms, universalism is the belief that God would not actually sentence rebellious human beings to eternal punishment, in spite of what He reveals in Holy Scripture. These persons believe in a God of their own devising, and not the God of the Bible.

Universalism also presents itself in a naive form, in which Christians refuse to deal with the issue and simply declare no position or conviction on the issue. Their stance betrays their lack of conviction and even compassion. Their conscience is uncluttered by concern for the lost.

The believing Church down through the ages has steadfastly resisted the universalist temptation, because universalism is so directly opposed to the clear teaching of Scripture. The Bible presents Jesus Christ and His atoning work as the only means of salvation, His gospel as the only “good news” for a lost world, and the gospel as the global mandate of the Church.

There is no room for universalism—whatever its form—in evangelical churches. By rejecting the finality of Jesus Christ and the integrity of His gospel, those who promote universalism are witnesses to another gospel—demonstrating a

perversion of the Gospel as the Apostle Paul had warned.

Given their commitment to the gospel, could evangelical Christians allow universalism to make inroads into their ranks? There are signs that this is now well underway. In the evangelical academy, some are advocating views well in line with the liberal Protestant arguments of the mid-century. The challenge of pluralism has found many evangelicals with weak knees. The pattern of evangelical compromise is also evident in those who seek to reduce the unique claim Christianity makes to truth, and also among those who promote the idea of a second opportunity for saving faith after death.

The pattern is not restricted to the academics, however. The most dangerous trend may be found in the pews of evangelical churches, where more and more Christians are willing to reject or compromise the uniqueness of Christ and His atonement, citing the apparent “sincerity” of those who worship other gods, or no god at all. Many American Christians seem increasingly reluctant to believe that their unsaved neighbors will go to hell. The urgency of world missions is a strange concept to a generation seemingly preoccupied with feel-good religion and self-help courses.

Where will the Church stand? A report released just a few years ago indicated that only a third of the participants at an Urbana missions conference (bringing together thousands of college-aged evangelicals) indicated a belief that “a person who does not hear the gospel is eternally lost.” As one missionary veteran responded: “If two-thirds of the most missions-minded young people in America do not affirm the lostness of mankind, the Great Commission is in serious trouble!” Should these trends remain unchecked and uncorrected, the missions cause—and the Church itself—will be in serious trouble indeed.

This is, as the late Carl F. H. Henry advised, a time for evangelical demonstration. Our words of support for the missionary cause are meaningless if we do not produce a new generation of bold, courageous, and committed Christian missionaries. Let us make our convictions clear. Evangelical Christians must take our stand for the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has made atonement for our sins. In a day of pluralism, we must point to the only Gospel that offers salvation. We must learn again to define the true gospel in terms of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the sum and substance of the genuine gospel—and the true gospel is always a missionary gospel.

