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Is This Evangelicalism's Terminal Generation?

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Benjamin Franklin, caught on the street during a break in the Constitutional Convention, is said to have been asked by a passerby to describe the new order to be proposed. “A republic,” he answered, “if you can keep it.” By definition, evangelicals are to be a Gospel people, cherishing, teaching, and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We will remain evangelical only insofar as we maintain the integrity of our Gospel witness—if we can keep it. We are truly evangelical only if we keep our testimony to the Gospel without confusion or compromise.

We should be very concerned about certain trends in contemporary evangelicalism that threaten this integrity. The first is an ominous confusion about the Gospel itself. The heart of the Gospel is the objective truth that Christ died for sinners, and that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ—alone. The cardinal doctrine of justification by faith is, as Martin Luther warned, “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

If so, the church is falling in many quarters. Much of what is presented in many pulpits—and marketed by flashy television preachers—bears little resemblance to this simple message. Instead, sinners are told to seek after riches, material blessings, vibrant health, and earthly rewards. Salvation is packaged as a product to be hawked on the airwaves and sold at a discount. The notion of salvation from sin and judgment is entirely missing from this scenario. Instead, salvation is presented as a gift of self-enhancement.

On the theological left, the Gospel had long ago been transformed into a social and political message of liberation from oppression. Now, among some who consider themselves evangelicals, the Gospel of Christ has been reduced to a form of self-expression or therapy. Salvation is promised as the answer to low self-esteem and emptiness. Gone is any notion of a holy God who offers salvation from sin and its eternal penalty.

The other pressing front in the current battle for the Gospel concerns the exclusivity of the work of Christ. The testimony of the Bible could not be more clear. Salvation comes to all who call upon the name of the Lord. Salvation comes through Jesus Christ—and through Jesus Christ alone.

In our culture of political correctness and intolerant tolerance, we are told that such a claim is simply unacceptable. There cannot be only one way of salvation. Who is to say that the religions of the world are wrong, and that Christianity alone is true?

Well, that is the non-negotiable criterion of evangelical faithfulness. Jesus identified Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life—and “no one comes to the Father, but through Me” [John 14:6]. Without this clear testimony, the Gospel is emptied of its integrity. The Bible allows no misunderstanding. Without conscious faith in Jesus Christ, there is no salvation.

Dean Kelley, a liberal Protestant, once noted that, “Even the most gentle, humble, and loving Christians must divide the world into those who confess Jesus as Lord and those who don’t.” Given the clarity of the Gospel, we have no other choice.

Even so, various forms of compromise erupt on this crucial front in the battle for the Gospel. Some advocate an open universalism, in which all persons are eventually saved. Others promote pluralism, promising that all roads will eventually lead to God, and that no faith has a privileged claim to truth. Closer to home, some have advocated a form of inclusivism in which other religions and faiths are seen to be included in the work of Christ. Still others advocate a form of “anonymous Christianity” or a post-mortem opportunity to confess Christ.

Against these various attempts to evade the simple clarity of the Gospel stands the Word of God. Our evangelical integrity stands or falls on this truth—salvation is found through faith in Christ alone. This is the logic of the missionary mandate and the sustaining conviction for all evangelism. Nevertheless, the worldview held by many individuals today—especially those among the educated classes—flatly rejects such claims as imperialistic and arrogant.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter has long warned that younger evangelicals tend to go soft on this doctrine. Educated in a culture of postmodern relativism and ideological pluralism, this generation has been taught to avoid making any exclusive claim to truth. Speak of your truth, if you must—but never claim to know the Truth. Unless this course is reversed, there will be no evangelicals in the next generation.

Charles Spurgeon stated it plainly: “We have come to a turning-point in the road. If we turn to the right, mayhap our children and our children’s children will go that way; but if we turn to the left, generations yet unborn will curse our names for having been unfaithful to God and to His Word.” Those words ring with prophetic urgency more than a century after they were written. Evangelicals must regain theological courage and conviction, or we must face the tragic reality that this may be evangelicalism’s terminal generation.

