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# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE GOSPEL OF GRACE?

Rediscovering the Doctrines  
that Shook the World

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

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*Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*

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# Preface



**D**o we still believe in the gospel of grace? Consider Os Guinness's perceptive observation of contemporary church life. In a recent book he offers several telling examples of how some evangelicals have come to trust technology rather than the gospel and the power of God for winning the lost and achieving church growth. A Florida pastor with a 7,000-member church observed, "I must be doing right or things wouldn't be going so well." A Christian advertising agent, who has represented Coca-Cola as well as having developed the "I Found It" evangelistic campaign, expressed his "faith" in even more shocking terms:

Back in Jerusalem where the church started, God performed a miracle there on the day of Pentecost. They didn't have the benefits of buttons and media, so God had to do a little supernatural work there. But today, with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society.

Another church growth consultant claims that "five to ten million baby boomers would be back in the fold within a month" if churches would only adopt three simple changes: 1) "Advertise," 2) Let people know about "product benefits," and 3) Be "nice to people."<sup>1</sup>

Has it come to that?

Apparently it has for some people, while others who would not express their trust in secular tools to accomplish spiritual work so brazenly nevertheless flirt with the world and its methods because the old ways no longer seem adequate to "get the job done." Really? Doesn't the gospel work anymore? Is the power of God

really impotent in dealing with the particular challenges of our modern and postmodern age?

The leaders who have banded together as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals believe that the problem is not our failure to use secular tools but ignorance of God and neglect of the gospel of salvation through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. We have achieved success—in a worldly sort of way. We have large churches with large budgets. We have immense commercial enterprises. But overall, church attendance in America has declined markedly in recent years (from a weekly high of about forty-six percent of the population to less than thirty-six percent today), and allegedly “born-again” people do not differ statistically in their beliefs and practices from their unbelieving neighbors. “We are living in a fool’s paradise,” said David Wells to a gathering of the National Association of Evangelicals several years ago.

The Alliance would like the evangelical church to recover its rich spiritual heritage by repenting of its rampant worldliness and by rediscovering the gospel of grace that meant so much to the Protestant Reformers. The Alliance purpose statement reads:

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals exists to call the church, amidst our dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God’s Word as did the Reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship and life.<sup>2</sup>

This book follows the outline of the Alliance purpose statement, unfolding in three parts: 1) Our Dying Culture, 2) Doctrines That Shook the World, and 3) The Shape of Renewal. The heart of the book is part 2, in which the five great Reformation “*solas*” are explained: *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), *solus Christus* (“Christ alone”), *sola gratia* (“grace alone”), *sola fide* (“faith alone”), and *solī Deo gloria* (“glory to God alone”).

This book is an expansion of a smaller booklet written for the Alliance, *What Makes a Church Evangelical?*<sup>3</sup> Those who have read that booklet will find some of its content here. Material has also been drawn from a few of my other writings, particularly the mate-

rial on the world and its ways of thinking in chapter 2. That chapter has been adapted, though with substantial changes, from parts of *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age: Preparing to Think and Act Biblically*.<sup>4</sup>

Some readers may be interested in the poetry that is printed at the start of each of these nine chapters. The lines are from new hymns (words and music) written for the worship services of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia,<sup>5</sup> which I have served as senior minister for more than thirty years. Instead of merely complaining about the sad lack of biblical and doctrinal content in most contemporary Christian music, we decided to do something positive by producing new hymns. They are based on Bible texts and focus on the doctrines unfolded in these pages.

We need a modern reformation—to recover the gospel of grace. May God Almighty be pleased to grant it. For his glory alone. Amen.

James Montgomery Boice  
Philadelphia



# The New Pragmatism

*'Round the throne in radiant glory  
All creation loudly sings  
Praise to God, to God Almighty—  
Day and night the anthem rings:  
“Holy, holy, holy, holy  
Is our God, the King of kings.”*

These are not good days for the evangelical church, and anyone who takes a moment to evaluate the life and outlook of evangelical churches will understand that.

In recent years a number of books have been published in an effort to understand what is happening, and they are saying much the same thing even though their authors come from different backgrounds and are doing different work. I was struck by three studies that appeared within a year or two of each other. The first was *No Place for Truth*, by David F. Wells,<sup>1</sup> professor of historical and systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. The second was *Power Religion*, by Michael Scott Horton,<sup>2</sup> vice president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. The third volume was *Ashamed of the Gospel*, by John MacArthur,<sup>3</sup> pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. Each of these authors was writing about the evangelical church, and one can get an idea of what each is saying just from the titles alone.

Yet the subtitles are even more revealing. The subtitle of Wells's book is *Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* The subtitle of Horton's book is *The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*. The subtitle of MacArthur's work proclaims *When the Church Becomes Like the World*.

When we put them together we realize that these careful observers of the current scene perceive that evangelicalism is seriously off-base today because it has abandoned its evangelical truth-heritage. The thesis of Wells's book is that the evangelical church is either dead or dying as a significant religious force because it has forgotten what it stands for. Instead of trying to do God's work in God's way, it is trying to build a prosperous earthly kingdom with secular tools. Thus, as we have noted, Wells declared that, in spite of our apparent success, we have been "living in a fool's paradise."

John H. Armstrong, founder and president of Reformation and Revival Ministries, edited a volume titled *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*.<sup>4</sup> When I asked him whether he thought the crisis was still coming or is actually here, he admitted that in his judgment the crisis is already upon us.

"And why is that?" I continued.

He answered, "It is because evangelicals have forgotten their theology."

## A THIRTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

Let me put my thoughts in historical perspective. When I returned to the United States from theological studies in Europe in 1966 to work at *Christianity Today*, I found that the 1960s were a time of rising influence for evangelicals. *Christianity Today* was part of the resurgence. Under the leadership of founding editor Carl F. H. Henry, the magazine was mounting an effective challenge to the liberal churches and especially to the liberal theological journal *The Christian Century*. The largest seminaries in the country were evangelical, some with thousands of students. Evangelical churches also were growing, and they were emerging from their comfortable suburban ghettos to engage selected aspects of the secular culture.

Observing this trend exactly a decade later, *Newsweek* magazine would call 1976 “the year of the evangelical.”

It was also a time of decline for the mainline churches. I was part of one of those denominations from 1968 to 1980, and I came to the conclusion that the mainline churches were trying to do God’s work in a secular way and that they were declining as a result. The older churches were pursuing the world’s wisdom, embracing the world’s theology, following the world’s agenda, and employing the world’s methods.

1. *The world’s wisdom.* In earlier ages of the church, Christians stood before their Bibles and confessed their ignorance of spiritual things. They even confessed their inability to understand what was written in the Bible except for the grace of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit to unfold the Bible’s wisdom to them. They sought the wisdom of God in Scripture. But this ancient wisdom had been set aside by the liberal church, with the result that the reforming voice of God in the church through the Scriptures was forgotten. The liberal denominations had been undermined by rationalism, and they were no longer able to receive the Bible as God’s Word to man, only as man’s word about God. The Bible might still be true overall or in places, they believed, but it could no longer be regarded as authoritative.

This had three sad consequences for these churches. First, it produced a state of uncertainty about what to believe. This was usually disguised, often by increasingly elaborate liturgies or by social programs. But it was the true case, and it explained why so many people were beginning to desert these churches and turn to conservative churches instead. Unable to redirect the bureaucracies by personal participation or by democratic vote, people began voting with their feet and either dropped out entirely or turned to those churches that still retained a biblical message.

About this time a churchman named Dean Kelley wrote a book titled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.<sup>5</sup> He said it was because they knew what they believed. He was right. People are not attracted to churches that do not know where they stand theologically.



Second, the liberal churches were embracing the outlook and moral values of the world. Since there was nothing to make them distinct, they ended up being merely a pale reflection of the culture in which they were functioning.

Third, they made decisions based not on the teachings of the Bible but as a response to the prevailing opinions of the time, what Francis Schaeffer called the wisdom of the fifty-one percent vote. Business was done by consensus. Issues would be discussed (usually with very little reference to the Bible or its principles), a vote would be taken, a majority carried the day, and the moderator would usually declare, “The Holy Spirit has spoken.” For the most part, I thought that the Holy Spirit had very little to do with what happened. But I also learned that if Christians throw out a transcendent authority, another authority will always come in to take the Bible’s place.

2. *The world’s theology.* The mainline churches had also adopted the world’s theology. The world’s theology is easy to define. It is the view that human beings are basically good, that no one is really lost, and that belief in Jesus Christ is not necessary for anyone’s salvation—though it may be helpful for some people. In popular terms it is the “I’m OK, you’re OK” philosophy.

In adopting this theology the liberal churches did not entirely abandon the traditional biblical terminology, of course. They could hardly have done that and still have pretended to be Christian. Many of the old biblical terms were retained, but they were given different meanings. *Sin* became not rebellion against God and his righteous law, for which we are held accountable, but ignorance or the oppression found in social structures. It was what the young people were shouting about in the 1960s. The way to overcome was by social change, new laws, or revolution. *Jesus* became not the incarnate God who died for our salvation but rather a pattern for creative living. We were to look to Jesus as an example, but not as a divine Savior. Some looked to him as a model revolutionary. *Salvation* was defined as liberation from oppressive social structures. *Faith* was becoming aware of oppression and beginning to do something about it. *Evangelism* did not mean car-

rying the gospel of Jesus Christ to a perishing world but rather working through or against the world's power centers to overthrow entrenched injustice.

3. *The world's agenda.* In the liberal churches the words "the world must set the agenda" were quite popular. That had been the theme of the 1964 gathering of the World Council of Churches, and it meant that the church's concerns should be the concerns of the world, even to the exclusion of the gospel. If the world's main priority was world hunger, that should be the church's priority too. Racism? Ecology? Aging? Whatever it was, it was to be first in the concerns of Christian people.

4. *The world's methods.* The final accommodation of the mainline churches to the world was in the realm of methods. The methods God has given for us to do his work are participation, persuasion, and prayer. But these three methods, particularly persuasion and prayer, were being jettisoned by the mainline churches as hopelessly inadequate, and what was proposed in their place was a gospel of power politics and money. I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* at about that time that I thought got it exactly right. Two Pilgrims were coming over on the Mayflower and one was saying to the other, "Religious freedom is my immediate goal, but my long-range plan is to go into real estate."

I was reminded of that cartoon years later when I heard the Reverend Phillip Jensen, the evangelical senior minister of St. Mathias Anglican Church in Sydney, Australia, say that in his opinion the major denominations are nothing more than real estate holding companies.

## THE WORLDLY (EVANGELICAL) CHURCHES

But here is the important thing. What has hit me like a thunderbolt in recent years is the discovery that what I had been saying about the liberal churches at the end of the 1960s and in the '70s now needs to be said about evangelical churches too.

Can it be that evangelicals, who have always opposed liberalism and its methods, have now also fixed their eyes on a worldly

kingdom and have made politics and money their weapons of choice for winning it? I think they have. About ten years ago Martin Marty, always a shrewd observer of the American church, said in a magazine interview that, in his judgment, by the end of the century evangelicals would be “the most worldly people in America.” He was exactly on target when he said that, except that he was probably a bit too cautious. Evangelicals fulfilled his prophecy before the turn of the millennium.

1. *The world's wisdom.* Evangelicals are not heretics, at least not consciously. If we ask whether the Bible is the authoritative and inerrant Word of God, most will answer affirmatively, at least if the question is asked in traditional ways. Is the Bible God's Word? Of course! All evangelicals know that. Is it authoritative? Yes, that too. Inerrant? Most evangelicals will affirm inerrancy. But many evangelicals have abandoned the Bible all the same simply because they do not think it is adequate for the challenges we face today. They do not think it is sufficient for winning people to Christ in this age, so they turn to felt-need sermons or entertainment or “signs and wonders” instead. They do not think the Bible is sufficient for achieving Christian growth, so they turn to therapy groups or Christian counseling. They do not think it is sufficient for making God's will known, so they look for external signs or revelations. They do not think it is adequate for changing our society, so they establish evangelical lobby groups in Washington and work to elect “Christian” congressmen, senators, presidents, and other officials. They seek change by power politics and money.

2. *The world's theology.* Like the liberals before us, evangelicals use the Bible's words but give them new meaning, pouring bad secular content into spiritual terminology. But differently, of course. We live in a therapeutic age now. So evangelicals have recast their theology in psychiatric terms. *Sin* has become dysfunctional behavior. *Salvation* is self-esteem or wholeness. *Jesus* is more of an example for right living than our Savior from sin and God's wrath. Sunday by Sunday people are told how to have happy marriages and raise nice children, but not how to get right with God.

The problem here is that sin is not dysfunction, though it may contribute to it. “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer to Question 14), and our major problem is not a lack of wholeness or a lack of integration of personalities but the peril of God’s wrath toward us for our sin. What we need from God in Christ is not an example for living but an atonement. Even preaching about happy marriages and raising nice children is wrong if it leads people to suppose that, if they succeed in these areas, everything is well with them whether or not they have repented of their sin, trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior, and are following him as their Lord.

3. *The world’s agenda.* The world’s major agenda—forget world hunger, racism, or ecology—is to be happy—happiness being understood, as Francis Schaeffer put it in several of his books, as the maximum amount of personal peace and sufficient affluence to enjoy it. But is that not the bottom line of much evangelical preaching today? To be happy? To be contented? To be satisfied? Some of the worst forms of this particularly Western form of worldliness are seen in the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers, who claim that it is God’s desire that his people be rich and feel satisfied. But it is also seen in preaching that extols the good life as a valid Christian goal while failing to address the sins of those who are living for themselves rather than for others. Far be it from many Christians today to preach a gospel that would expose sin and drive men and women to the Savior—or demand a hard following after Jesus Christ as the only true discipleship.

4. *The world’s methods.* Evangelicals have become like liberals in this area too. How else are we to explain the emphasis so many place on numerical growth, large physical plants, and money? Or so many bizarre approaches to evangelism? Or that so many pastors tone down the hard edges of biblical truth in order to attract greater numbers to their services? Or that we major in entertainment? Or that so many support a National Association of

Evangelicals lobby in Washington? Or that we have created social action groups to advance specific legislation?

Not long ago I came across a newspaper story about a church that is trying to attract worshipers by imitating radio news programs that promise: “Give us twenty-two minutes, and we’ll give you the world.” Their 9:00 A.M. Sunday service is called “Express Worship,” and the hook is that parishioners can come in and be out in twenty-two minutes. In one service described by the newspaper, the pastor began with a greeting and a short prayer, followed by a reading from Luke 7:1-10. He then asked the worshipers to write down their thoughts on what constitutes authority in their lives. Finally, they sang “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and went out. The pastor described it as “a restructuring of the way we think of the service. Not one person delivering the truth to you, but a shared experience.”

The newspaper said, “Give him twenty-two minutes, and he’ll give you the Lord.”

Here is another example. An evangelical church in Philadelphia recently distributed a brochure giving “ten reasons” to visit their Sunday evening service:

1. The air conditioning feels great.
2. Coffee and goodies for everyone after every service.
3. The music is upbeat and easy to sing.
4. You get to meet some really neat people.
5. The sermon is always relevant to everyday life.
6. You can sleep in on Sundays and still make it to church on time.
7. Child care and children’s church are provided.
8. Free parking!
9. You can go to the shore for the weekend and still make it to church on Sunday night.
10. You will discover an awesome God who cares about you.

When I saw that I was reminded of an advertising brochure I had come across some years before. See if you can guess what is being described. This brochure was printed in full color with pic-

tures of attractive people, and the cover read: “This Is Where It’s At.” Inside it had headings like these:

It’s about family.

It’s about style.

It’s about giving.

It’s about fun.

It’s about the best way to please everybody.

It’s about caring.

Actually, the brochure was an advertisement for the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers, Massachusetts. But its appeal is virtually undistinguishable from that of the churches I am describing.

Or, to follow a different line, consider evangelical rhetoric. Evangelicals speak of “taking back America,” “fighting for the country’s soul,” “reclaiming the United States for Christ.” How? By electing Christian presidents, congressmen, and senators, lobbying for conservative judges, taking over power structures, and imposing our Christian standard of morality on the rest of the nation by law. But we ought to ask: Was America ever really a Christian nation? Was any nation ever really Christian? Does law produce morality? What about Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities—the city of man and the city of God—which meant so much to the Reformers? Will any country ever be anything other than man’s city? And what about America’s soul? Is there really an American soul to be redeemed or fought over?

Recently a book appeared written by two people who had been active in the Moral Majority movement in the first half of the 1980s. It is titled *Blinded by Might*, and its authors are Cal Thomas, now a syndicated religion columnist appearing in more than 475 newspapers nationwide, and Ed Dobson, pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Thomas and Dobson saw the years 1980–1985 as a period of tremendous opportunity for Christians, and they believe there were significant achievements. The Moral Majority focused public discussion on moral issues. It drew attention to the role of religion and religious people in the political pro-

cess. It awakened millions of formerly dormant Christians to their civic responsibility. Still, Thomas and Dobson judge the movement to have been a failure, because they believe they were trying to achieve the renewal of the country through a political process, which does not and cannot happen, rather than from the bottom up through lives that have been changed by God. “We failed because we were unable to redirect a nation from the top down,” they concluded. “Real change must come from the bottom up or, better yet, from the inside out.”<sup>6</sup>

And failure was not the only problem. Along the way evangelicals were seduced by the allure of worldly power. Quoting 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, which says that the Christian’s true weapons are not the weapons of this world but the weapons of truth, persuasion, and character, the authors write, “The strongholds and pretensions [of this world] can only be demolished under two conditions: one, that we don’t fight with the world’s weapons, but with divine ones; and two, that our obedience is complete. We have been trying to use the world’s weapons of political power, and we have not been sufficiently obedient to the call of Jesus to care as he cares and do as he did.”<sup>7</sup> Their summary:

We don’t have a shortage of leaders, but a shortage of followers of the one Leader who can transform lives and nations. We don’t need to enlarge our vision, but make it smaller and more focused. We don’t need more numbers, but more quality and consistency among the numbers we already have. We need more people who will do things God’s way and fewer people doing things man’s way.<sup>8</sup>

These are strong words. But they come from people who have walked the path of political power and have found it to lead nowhere.

When you put these contemporary evangelical characteristics together—pursuit of the world’s wisdom, acceptance of the world’s theology, adoption of the world’s agenda, and utilization of the world’s methods—it is hard to escape the feeling that today’s evangelicals have fallen into the trap of the liberals before them. Much

of the time they sound like the liberal journal *The Christian Century* that *Christianity Today* was founded to oppose. And as for *Christianity Today* itself, it has become a lot like *The Christian Century* was, though with far less theological content.

## THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE MODERN

A major part of the problem is the onslaught of the modern age. The dominant philosophy of today's generation is relativism, the rejection of absolutes (as described by Allan Bloom in his best-selling book on higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>9</sup>), and the substitution of pragmatism for truth. Moreover, hard on the heels of philosophical relativism came the militant attack on beliefs or values of any kind known popularly as postmodernity.

Evangelicals seem to have succumbed to this spirit.

If truth is relative, as the majority of people living in our age believe, then one idea is as good as another, and the only criteria for choosing one course of action rather than another are: 1) pragmatism (does it accomplish what we want?) and 2) pleasure (do we feel good after we have done it?). Instead of people saying that they agree or disagree with a statement, they respond that they either "like" or "dislike" it. We no longer ask people, "What do you think about this?" We ask them, "How do you feel about it?" Few are guided by principle any longer, only by what they prefer. "You have to decide what's right for you," we are told. In such a climate, the only remaining virtue is tolerance, and the only philosophies that are wrong are those that believe in truth.

Evangelicals deny that they also think this way, but the facts undermine their denials. Recent polls by sociologists such as George Gallup, Jr., and George Barna show that the majority of evangelicals no longer believe in absolute truth. Seventy-six percent believe that human beings are, by nature, basically good. Eighty-six percent believe that, in salvation, "God helps those who help themselves." Evangelicals used to be defined by their theology. But today they are increasingly defined by their style. They used to seek pastors who knew the Bible. Today they search for ministers with entertainment



and management skills. They flock to dynamic pulpit personalities rather than to those who exhibit godly character.

In a recent article Gene E. Veith describes the impact of our postmodern times on two things: 1) the content of preaching and 2) the church growth movement:

In a “mega-shift” away from classic Protestant theology, many evangelicals are proclaiming a touchy-feely, therapeutic god who is light years away from the Holy One of Israel. This is a god of tolerance, who condemns no one and who can be reached by many different paths. Instead of the forgiveness of sins, the mega-shift preachers offer the gospel of a good self-image and earthly success through positive thinking.

Often accompanying mega-shift theology is the church growth movement, which seeks to build mega-churches by adjusting Christianity to the desires of the culture. Doctrine does not go over well in an age of relativism, so in order to attract new members, theological content must be minimized. Nor do people wish to hear about sin, so the church must cultivate an atmosphere of moral tolerance. Since people choose their religious beliefs not so much on the basis of whether they are true but whether they “like” the particular church, the life of the congregation must be made as pleasant and undemanding as possible. The exaltation of the pleasure-principle means that worship services above all must be entertaining. The exaltation of the will means that the customers must be given what they want.<sup>10</sup>

Some of these changes are unconscious, of course. But they are nonetheless serious and may eventually be fatal for those who have embraced them uncritically. How can we who are evangelicals decry the world when we are seemingly so hell-bent on imitating it? How can we denounce humanism when we are so blatantly man-centered ourselves?

The central reality for evangelicals, as for all others who name the name of Christ, is that Christianity is a religion of truth. It is based on certain facts of history that concern the revelation of God to his people and his salvation of those people by the work of his

Son. Wherever that is forgotten or lost, as it is being lost in our day, Christianity ceases to remain truly Christian and becomes only another religiously oriented self-help program. Veith says rightly that Christianity thrives “not by trying to offer people what they already have, but by offering them what they desperately lack—namely, the Word of God and salvation through Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

Is the situation hopeless? Is there really any hope that the church will return to the gospel of grace? Some would say so. But nothing can ever be hopeless where God and his gospel are concerned. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is one organization that has been formed to address the situation. It began in 1994 when a group of leaders met to discuss the decline they were seeing in evangelicalism and to ask whether something might be done to revive the evangelical churches. After an informal meeting in Philadelphia in February of that year, a larger group of fifteen leaders met in September for a strategic planning conference in Orlando, Florida, where discussion of common concerns gave birth to this new effort. As noted in the preface to this book, the Alliance adopted the following mission statement:

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals exists to call the church, amidst our dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God’s Word as did the Reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship and life.

The next step was to gather one hundred and twenty evangelical pastors, teachers, and leaders of parachurch organizations in Cambridge, Massachusetts (April 1996) to produce the “Cambridge Declaration.”<sup>12</sup> This declaration was the product of four days of meetings in which papers were presented on four subjects: “Our Dying Culture,” “The Truths of God’s Word,” “Repentance, Recovery and Confession,” and “The Reformation of

the Church in Doctrine, Worship and Life.” The declaration, which flowed from the papers, argued that chief among the truths evangelicals need to recover are the great Reformation doctrines summarized by the well-known *solas* (Latin for “only” or “alone”): *sola Scriptura*, which means “Scripture alone”; *solus Christus*, which means “Christ alone”; *sola gratia*, which means “grace alone”; *sola fide*, which means “faith alone”; and *solī Deo gloria*, which means “glory to God alone.”

Some matters of theology and church government are debatable and will undoubtedly be so until Jesus comes again. This will be true even among the most biblical theologians and the most sincere believers. Moreover, most leaders recognize that not everything that is desirable for the church, including these debatable matters, however important some of them may be, is essential for the church’s survival. But these qualifications do not apply here. Without these five confessional statements—Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and glory to God alone—we do not have a true church, and certainly not one that will survive for very long. For how can any church be a true and faithful church if it does not stand for Scripture alone, is not committed to a biblical gospel, and does not exist for God’s glory? A church without these convictions has ceased to be a true church, whatever else it may be.

1. *Scripture alone*. When the Reformers used the words *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) they were expressing their concern for the Bible’s authority, and what they meant to say by those words is that the Bible alone is our ultimate authority—not the pope, not the church, not the traditions of the church or church councils, still less personal intimations or subjective feelings, but Scripture only. Other sources of authority may have an important role to play. Some are even established by God—such as the authority of church elders, the authority of the state, or the authority of parents over children. But Scripture alone is truly ultimate. Therefore, if any of these other authorities depart from Bible teaching, they are to be judged by the Bible and rejected.

*Sola Scriptura* has been called the formal principle of the

Reformation, meaning that it stands at the very beginning and thus gives form or direction to all that Christians affirm as Christians. Evangelicals abandon *sola Scriptura* when they reinterpret the Bible to fit modern notions of reality or ignore it on the basis of supposed private divine revelations or leadings.

At the beginning of 1978, I became chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, an organization that made an important contribution to evangelical thought. The inerrancy of the Bible is a critical doctrine. We were right to defend it and had some important successes in doing so. However, important as that matter was, I do not think the inerrancy of the Bible is the most important Scripture issue facing the church as we move into the early years of the third millennium. The issue I would pinpoint today is the *sufficiency* of God's Word, meaning: Do we really believe that in this book God has given us what we need to do all necessary spiritual work? Or do we think we have to supplement the Bible with man-made techniques or devices? Consider these questions about four important areas of the church's work:

*Evangelism:* Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism? Must we attract people to our churches by showmanship and entertainment?

*Sanctification:* Do we need psychology and psychiatry for Christian growth? Are encounter groups essential?

*Discerning God's will:* Do we need extra-biblical signs or miracles for guidance? Does God speak by personal revelations or "in our hearts"?

*Impacting society:* Is the Bible's teaching adequate for achieving social progress and reform?

Unfortunately, it is possible to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, as many if not all evangelicals claim to do, and still effectually to

repudiate it because we think that it does not work today and are convinced that other things need to be brought in to accomplish what the Bible cannot do.

2. *Christ alone*. The church of the Middle Ages spoke about Christ. A church that failed to do that could hardly claim to be Christian. But the medieval church had added many human achievements to Christ's work, so that it was no longer possible to say that salvation was entirely by Christ and his atonement. Christ was part of it, even the major part. But salvation was also said to be won by human merit, especially the merit of the saints. The saints were said to have been so exceptionally holy that they had accumulated masses of excess merit that could be applied to lesser believers by the sacraments through church authority. The church was able to effect salvation by tapping into this "treasury of merit." This was the most basic of all heresies, as the Reformers rightly perceived. It was the work of God *plus* the work of man, Jesus' righteousness *plus* our own righteousness.

The Reformation motto *solus Christus* ("Christ alone") was formed to repudiate this error. It affirmed that salvation has been accomplished once for all by the mediatorial work of the historical Jesus Christ alone. His sinless life and substitutionary atonement alone are sufficient for our justification, and any "gospel" that fails to acknowledge that or denies it is a false gospel that will save no one. Because the Roman Catholic Church was teaching this false gospel, the Reformers declared that it was a false or apostate church.

3. *Grace alone*. The words *sola gratia* ("grace alone") mean that human beings have no claim upon God. That is, God owes us nothing except just punishment for our many and very willful sins. Therefore, if he does save sinners, which he does in the case of some but not all, it is only because it pleases him to do it. Indeed, apart from this grace and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that flows from it, no one would be saved, since in our lost condition human beings are not capable of winning, seeking out, or even cooperating with God's grace. By insisting on "grace alone" the Reformers were denying that human methods, techniques, or strategies in themselves could ever bring anyone to faith. It is grace

alone expressed through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ, releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from death to spiritual life.

4. *Faith alone*. The Reformers never tired of saying that “justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.” When put into theological shorthand the doctrine was expressed as “justification by faith alone,” the article by which the church stands or falls, according to Martin Luther. The Reformers called justification by faith Christianity’s “material principle,” because it involves the very matter or substance of what a person must understand and believe to be saved. Justification is a declaration of God based on the work of Christ. It flows from God’s grace and it comes to the individual not by anything he or she might do but by “faith alone.” We may state the full doctrine as:

Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous because of Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.

This is what Paul teaches in Romans 3:21-26, verses that include each of these elements. They refer to a righteousness that is not our own but is instead a righteousness from God revealed from heaven (v. 21). They speak of God’s grace (“justified freely by his grace,” v. 24). They talk about faith; the word appears eight times in verses 21-31. And this is said to be possible because of Christ alone: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 22), and we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (v. 24).

5. *Glory to God alone*. Each of the great *solas*—“Scripture alone” (*sola Scriptura*), “Christ alone” (*solus Christus*), “grace alone” (*sola gratia*) and “faith alone” (*sola fide*)—is summed up in the fifth Reformation motto: *solī Deo gloria*, meaning “to God alone be the glory.” It is what the apostle Paul expressed in Romans 11:36 when he wrote, “to him be the glory forever! Amen.” These words follow naturally from the preceding words, “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (v. 36), since it is

because all things really are from God, through God, and to God, that we say “to God alone be the glory.”

I will be arguing in this book that, although there are many reasons for the desertion of the Reformation gospel by today’s evangelicals—among them obsession with the culture, a consumer mentality, and a recasting of the gospel in worldly terms to appeal to unbelievers—the chief problem is that we have forgotten God and are not really living for his glory. In the church of the Middle Ages, God’s glory was acknowledged though diminished by ascribing so much false credit to man or to the church and its sacraments. The problem today is that we hardly think of God at all, and the reason we do not think about him is that we have forgotten the meaning and importance of these essential doctrines.

## WHAT CAN I DO NOW?

Can anything be done about the current problems within evangelical churches? The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals believes that something can be done, but it will not be easy. The opening statement of the Cambridge Declaration says, “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.” This calls for three things:

1. *We must recognize and understand the problem.* The problem is that we are “dominated by the spirit of this age,” even though we appear to have right doctrines and believe the right things.

Several decades ago, when the conservative rebirth was getting underway, evangelical churches and organizations were held together by varieties of a typical “creed” or statement of faith. It usually had about twelve points, starting with God or the Bible; affirming the deity of Christ, his virgin birth, and resurrection; acknowledging the Great Commission; and concluding with statements about Christ’s visible bodily return and the final judgment. These short evangelical creeds avoided most divisive matters. They did not refer to the church; they ignored the sacraments; they

passed by the sovereignty of God in salvation and the inability of lost people to respond to the gospel apart from God's grace. Nevertheless, as far as they went, they stated their short list of non-negotiables with clarity.

In spite of their obvious weaknesses, especially when compared to the powerful creeds of the Reformation, these evangelical faith statements seemed to work well at holding evangelicals to a supernatural gospel. But it would seem also that evangelical strength actually lay in the fact that the Christians involved knew more of their Bibles and had deeper theological commitments than their truncated creeds suggested. Most were part of some ecclesiastical tradition going back to the Reformation; and many members of evangelical churches who were not actually Christians held to something like a Christian world- and life-view.

All of that has disappeared. Very few people have anything like a Christian world- and life-view today, and we are discovering that—in a secular and increasingly hostile culture—mild evangelical consensus statements are inadequate. For all its apparent strength, evangelicalism has become weak at the center, and the result has been the surrender to the world's wisdom, theology, agenda, and methods described earlier. Instead of reducing our affirmations in this way, we need to recover and proclaim the gospel of grace—a robust, full-orbed theology with a transcendent view of God and an informed focus on the doctrines of his grace.

2. *We must repent of this sin.* People do not like to talk about sin today, but sin is our problem and we must talk about it and deal with it if we are to move forward. When we talk about repenting of this sin we mean that our doctrinal failure is an offense against God and is therefore something for which we need seriously to repent. The very first of "The Ninety-five Theses" prepared by Martin Luther said, "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'repent,' he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance." If that is true of "the entire life of believers," it is certainly true of our first and standing obligation to defend and proclaim the gospel, which we have failed to do.

3. *We must recover the historic Christian faith.* This will require



serious study of the Bible, and for some it will involve a radical reordering of their entire perspectives, not to mention the way they have been going about their Christian work. For all, it will mean a new reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the teaching and preaching of God's Word, rather than a frantic search for some tantalizing new methodology to persuade unbelievers to attend and join our churches.

In 1524, seven years after Martin Luther had nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, the farmers of Germany rebelled against their feudal lords in what became known as The Peasants' War (1524–1526). It began near Schaffhausen, where Hans Mueller, acting on a suggestion from Thomas Muenzer, formed the peasants into an "Evangelical Brotherhood" pledged to emancipate the farmers. By the end of that year there were 30,000 farmers in arms in southern Germany refusing to pay state taxes, church tithes, or feudal dues. In March 1525, they drafted and circulated widely a document called the "Twelve Articles," in which they claimed the right to choose their own pastors, pay only just tithes, be considered as free men rather than serfs, enjoy fair rents, and make other reasonable demands. They were also favorable to the Reformation and opposed to the Roman Catholic Church.

The peasants sent a copy of the articles to Luther, fully expecting his support. And, indeed, Luther's first response was sympathetic. He acknowledged the injustices about which the farmers were in arms and blamed the rulers of both state and church for their plight. But Luther did not endorse the rebellion, even though the majority of its goals coincided with those of the Reformation. And later, when hundreds of monasteries were sacked and many cities overrun, Luther denounced the violence in characteristically fierce terms. Why did Luther react this way, when nearly everyone, the peasants above all, expected him to side with them? Luther's justified fear of anarchy was one strong reason. Another was his belief that God had established the authority of princes. To rebel against the powers that exist is to rebel against God, he said.

Luther also knew that the power of the sword has not been

given either to the church or to the individual Christian, and he was aware that our weapons are not the weapons of this world. It is the power of God operating through the teaching of his Word that alone has power “to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4). According to Luther, the Reformation would proceed *non vi, sed verbo*—not by force, but by the power of God’s Word. And it did! The Peasants’ War was a tragic episode in the Reformation period. As far as Germany was concerned, more lives were lost in that war than in any tumult prior to the Thirty Years’ War, which came about a century later (1618–1648). Some 130,000 farmers died in battle or afterward as a result of harsh retaliation. The Reformation itself almost perished. But it did not, because it was moving forward by the power of the Word of God, as God blessed the teaching and influence of the Reformers.

Can we have that power again in our day? We can. But only if we hold to the full-orbed Reformation gospel and do not compromise with the culture around us, as we have been doing. If we hold to these doctrines, our churches and those we influence will grow stronger, while other churches go the way of the liberals before us, not vanishing entirely but becoming increasingly insignificant as an effective religious force.