
Pro Rege

Volume 34 | Number 3

Article 6

March 2006

Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World? (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Van Geest, Fred (2006) "Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World? (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 34: No. 3, 32.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol34/iss3/6

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Book Review

Ronald J. Sider. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005. 144 pp. ISBN: 0801065410, 12.95. Reviewed by Dr. Fred Van Geest, Professor of Political Studies, Dordt College.

It may be tempting for readers of Ronald Sider's new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, to focus on the scandal he describes in the first chapter of the book. And indeed, what a scandal it is! It is the sort of thing that makes good headlines and provides ample evidence for critics of the evangelical community who like to point to its hypocrisy.

But this is certainly not Sider's intent. Drawing on recent polling data and surveys of evangelical behavior, Sider reports that evangelicals demonstrate very few lifestyle differences from fellow citizens, contrary to what you might expect from Christians who claim their lives have been transformed by their commitment to Jesus Christ. Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, adultery, pre-marital sex, promiscuity, co-habitation, charitable giving, pornography, racism, or physical and sexual abuse, the embarrassing conclusion is the same: evangelicals appear to be no different from others. They are doing even worse, for example, on the issue of racism or divorce rates in certain segments of the evangelical community. The general picture painted by this data appears to be how irrelevant the Christian faith is to the lifestyle practices of the evangelical community. Sadly, the church looks no different from the world it is called to transform.

The best thing about Sider's book is that he does not dwell on these negative findings. In fact, the bulk of the book is devoted to explaining why evangelicals do so poorly in these areas of life and what can be done about it. It also provides a wonderful description of basic Scriptural teachings on sin, forgiveness, confession, obedience, and sanctification. The point of sanctification, according to Sider, is to show how radically different a Christian community that subscribes to these beliefs *ought* to be. Sider writes in a way that seeks to correct several misunderstandings evangelicals have of the Christian faith and life, focusing specifically on an understanding of the gospel that is individualistic, salvation focused, and costless ("cheap grace"). He sees these as the root causes of the scandal. He counters by pointing out the importance of Christ's teachings about the kingdom of God and the command to the Christian community to act in a way that advances His kingdom here and now on this earth. Additionally, he focuses on discipleship, Godly living, and mutual accountability. Sider echoes a central theme of his book *Just Generosity* (Baker, 1999): not much is likely to change until evangelicals recognize the reality

of both "individual sin" and the "social sin" that resides in social structures.

This book has its greatest value as corrective teaching aimed at the evangelical community. While Sider's book is of clear relevance to individual evangelicals, he is really seeking change in the church. He makes a number of recommendations, including greater pursuit of the practice of church discipline, better preaching on "sin," and the use of small groups for discipleship, accountability, and community building. Using strong language at times, he even goes so far as to call for greater accountability for para-church organizations and independent churches, bringing them in closer alignment with the institutional church or networks of churches and away from their individualistic ways.

This book raises some interesting questions for the reader. For instance, are there evangelical behaviors, such as giving expression to compassion, kindness, humility, justice, or the desire to forgive, that are being overlooked because they are not quantifiable? Would examining these change Sider's key points? Sider also reports on a study which finds that only 9 percent of born-again evangelicals have a "biblical worldview." What does this mean and what does it say about the true identity of the Christian community in America? If it is even possible, how exactly can the Christian community exert greater control over para-church organizations and independent churches? What are other effective processes and practices that churches can use to close the "sanctification gap"? Are there some helpful, instructive contemporary examples of churches living as counter-cultural communities?

This short book is vintage Ron Sider. It is passionate, provocative, biblically grounded, and is well worth the read. It is not about pointing out the hypocrisy of evangelicals or making them feel guilty. Sider cares deeply about how the scandal he describes damages the credibility of the faith and "mocks Christ." Hence, he does not shy away from preaching the truth and reminding readers of biblical warnings to Christians who continue in their sinful ways. He gives us hope in describing how the early Christian church *was* perceived to be different from its surrounding culture. Like his other books, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* is issued in love to the Christian community, partly as a wake-up call and partly as pastoral teaching aimed at what Sider is so deeply committed to—societal transformation and the building of the kingdom of God.