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No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Book Review)

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have been offered for differences between male and female in our society, ranging from the social-environmental to the sociobiological. He rejects both poles while admitting that nature and nurture contribute to gender differences: "The small differences produced by biology are made large by culture" (30).

In response to women's liberation movements, men began developing their own consciousness-raising movement. In 1983 the National Organization for Changing Men emerged, but it has not attracted a wide following. In the last five years, however, several books suggest ways for men to face the new challenges posed by the changing roles of women. The "new male" asks that men get in touch with the king, warrior, magician, and lover within themselves. The author is not satisfied with either the traditional male or the "new male" model. He carefully evaluates both. Then he looks to Jesus as the ideal model for manhood, and attempts to describe this model more fully at various points throughout the book.

However, in describing what he calls "male issues," such as male inexpressiveness, competition, aggression and war, power, male sexuality, etc., he relies too heavily on only a few sources and traditional stereotypes. For example, most of the chapter on male expressiveness contains little reference to the large numbers of research studies on differences between male and female communication. Recent meta-analysis of these studies indicates far fewer differences between male and female communication than popular literature claims (cf. *Communication Quarterly*, Spring, 1993). More careful study of communication would free Balswick from thinking of men as stereotyped by popular books. Indeed, his references include none from the field of communication. While many men might find themselves in his description of how men express themselves, many others would not. The same

criticism can be made of his handling of the other "male issues" in this section of the book. But he does offer his opinion forthrightly.

Most helpful is Balswick's chapter on "Fathering." He indicates that too many males in our society have not had a father present in the home to teach boys how to become men. Consequently, without men present, boys tend to develop their identity in reaction to women and too many find their standards in peer groups made up of boys who likewise have not had male models in the home. He very clearly provides a biblical model for fathering by drawing on a biblical description of God as Father to his people. The responsibilities for raising children belong to fathers as well as mothers. Fathers are capable of nurturing children as well as mothers. And it benefits them as well: "Strong fathering can do more than anything else to build strong, confident masculinity" (169).

In the final chapter, the author steers a course for men that asks them to avoid reacting negatively and defensively to all changes and to avoid welcoming all new definitions of masculinity as they are introduced. His own experience with men's groups provides the basis for his practical helps, which point the way for more communication and reflection with men particularly. His conclusion is noteworthy: "The signs of authentic Christian masculinity will be that men in Christian community will seek to *support rather than dominate women, empower rather than control younger men and mentor and complement rather than compete with other men*" (212). In spite of his tendency to rely too heavily on stereotypes, the author provides much reflection for both men and women as they consider how to handle changing sex-roles in our North American culture. He correctly emphasizes that Christians must lead the way in showing the face of normative male and female relationships.

No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?, by David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1993, 301 pages, hardback, \$24.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

"Why do I have to study theology? It's irrelevant to my desire to minister to people in the church." This statement from a young seminarian is where Wells begins his indictment of an evangelicalism that has become happily illiterate theologically. It would seem that two terms beg definition for Wells' indictment to stand: evangelicalism and theology. Yet both are rather elusive terms for Wells, and his difficulty in definition forms both the particular strength and the weakness of the book. The irony is that as his definition of theology gets clearer and purer his definition of evangelicalism becomes more and more amorphous and evanescent. Upon reflection, I appreciate that, but it caused me some problems in reading the book.

Let me explain. First the issue of theology. Early in the book Wells appeared to function under a rather static, even

scholastic understanding of theology. Definitions ranged from intellection on the supernatural to "the cogent articulation of the knowledge of God" (3-6). I fear that such definitions will not help Wells in breaking theology out of the evangelical prisonhouse of irrelevance. Thankfully, Wells moves on to a more full-bodied understanding of theology, but not until a full one-third of the book has gone by. After he has led his reader to believe that he thinks of theology as rational discourse about otherworldly things, Wells marvellously opens up theology in two stages. First, he speaks of theology having three aspects: confession or the content of faith, reflection upon that confession, and finally the practice of spirituality or wisdom that comes from confession and reflection. While this clarification is extremely helpful, Wells doesn't really

disclose what he means by confession until the seventh chapter, in which he makes a wonderful case for theology as being concerned with the historical acts of God proclaimed in and interpreted by scripture. I almost wish he had made this the first chapter, and allowed the privatism and selfism of evangelicalism to wither in the light of a confession that proclaims a God who is capable of working cosmically and historically.

That Wells takes so long delineating his understanding of theology as the articulation of the external and objective historical action of God does make sense, however, in light of evangelicalism's tendency to think of theology as a useless, irrelevant, polemical, and theoretical enterprise (98). A distinctly anti-theological mood has gripped evangelical religion. The cultural acceptance that evangelicalism has found in late twentieth-century North America has served to dilute and evaporate its biblical and confessional underpinnings (129). Knowing the history and significance of the drama of redemption is replaced by a fuzzy assurance that "Christ somehow died for people" (131). The evidence that theological rigor (and by necessary extension, confessional integrity) is quickly slipping away within the ranks of evangelicalism is staggering. Wells notes the death of theological publication and discourse, and the fact that colleges and seminaries are discontinuing courses in theology to make room for "practical" courses in ministry. His treatment of the trend at mainline evangelical publications like *Christianity Today* and *Leadership Magazine* is instructive here (113, 209). Psychology, business management, and personal testimony take the place of recounting and contextualizing the drama of redemption. Under the auspices of the Church Growth Movement, theology has become a swear word:

They view theological profanity as an oddity, something irrelevant to the health and well-being of the Church today. Some are even more explicit, asserting that Christianity will become attractive in the world today only to the extent that it is emptied of all theology. (289)

What happens, of course, is that confession is impoverished if not lost altogether; reflection dies for lack of fuel and oxygen, and wisdom must seek other sources of funding (101).

What can fill the vacuum left by evangelicalism's self-imposed confessional poverty? "Many in the Church have now turned in upon themselves and substituted for the knowledge of God a search for the knowledge of self" (7). Psychology has become the confessional center of evangelicalism. The Enlightenment motto of *man the measure of all* has come home to roost in evangelicalism. As pietism replaced Calvinism in the nineteenth century, so theology has been moved off the confessional shelves to make room for the selfist wares of a reductionist anthropocentric confession. "The whole idea of confession has shifted from truth with an external and objective referent to intuition which is internal and subjective" (118).

The shift to internal authority ultimately means a shift to internal content. When God speaks to the individual soul, there is finally no telling the difference between the two.

Under the banner of "life, not doctrine," evangelicalism has created "a Christ *relativized* by personal consciousness" for itself. Good relations and warm feelings become the soteriology of a faith that is now marketed as a tool for self-discovery. The pursuit of holiness becomes a searching after psychological wholeness once truth is limited to that which is privately and subjectively appealing (183). A national poll in 1990 reported that one-third of all US adults claim a born-again experience. Why then, Wells asks, isn't our culture less secular than it is? How can American culture function as if all those Christians aren't there? The answer is that they're not there. "They are the people of the inner life" (135-36). When private, subjective experience takes on a privileged access to reality, that reality will necessarily also be private and subjective.

The consequence of evangelicalism's sell-out to pietism is its own cultural irrelevance and nakedness before modernity. By retreating "into internal privacy, into a world that need never come to terms with the world outside" (131), evangelical Christianity falls victim to the ideological pluralism of American culture. Modern mass society enforces a public ethic devoid of moral judgment. All moral or confessional judgments are pushed to the cultural periphery of the private sector where they are irrelevant to social etiquette. In other words, Christianity is allowed to cohabitate with secular culture so long as Christianity knows and respects its place—a space near the fringe that does not impede the technological and economic machinery of secular culture. And evangelicals have made themselves incapable of doing anything other than play along. Being an evangelical can only mean having a certain kind of religious experience, an experience that gives color and meaning to the private aspects of life. Questions of truth relevant to the world outside of the individual soul are unwanted and unnecessary (130). All that's left is a half-hearted attempt to play games with the sociology of knowledge, in which we plead for the right to see things differently. Once you pick up the Enlightenment fiddle, you have to play its tune (72).

All of this means that evangelicalism has become a co-conspirator in the secularization of American culture. By walling God up in the privacy of the inner life we have made him irrelevant to the stuff of everyday life. Capitalism, urbanization, technology, and the mass media have become the public deities of evangelicalism as surely as they have become the idols of our time. They are our deities, according to Wells, because they provide a total context in which life is lived and from which God himself is typically excluded (284). Evangelicalism has forged a moral truce with secular culture. Evangelicalism has become the culture-Christianity of the late twentieth century. The liberalism of the early part of the century

used its notion of divine immanence to adapt the Christian faith to an all-conquering secularism. Evangelicalism functions under the equally wrong-headed notion of the value neutrality of cultural formation and its artifacts in order to cut its own deal with secularism (296). The result is the same either way: a reduction of the faith to the self:

Where the self circumscribes the significance of Christian faith, good and evil are reduced to a sense of well-being or its absence, God's place in the world is reduced to the private domain of private consciousness, his external acts of redemption are trimmed to fit the experience of personal salvation, his providence in the world is diminished to whatever is necessary to ensure one's having a good day The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self. (183)

Evangelicalism really hasn't said goodbye to theology, as much as it has redefined it as a means of psychic fulfillment and moved it to the private heart. The traditional profession has been allowed to stand unchanged. It is the meaning and arena of confession's operation that has been altered (108, 290). Thus the confession that Jesus is Lord (the sovereign master over all creation who calls me to loving obedience and service) has become the confession that Jesus is Lord (my personal savior who makes me feel good about myself). Unfortunately, the modern evangelical is unable to appreciate the difference. And that is due to the lack of reflective ability left by the void of substantive confessional content. Evangelicals have lost the ability to think christianly about culture and the world about them (7). The value of argument has all but disappeared in the feel-good success-oriented gospel of modern evangelicalism. Thus the student cries, "Why do we have to study this stuff? Can't we just believe it?" (If I had a nickel for each time I've heard that one, I could belly-up to the best steak in Iowa.) But that's O.K. Our shrunken

gospel need not deal with the world as it really is, because our gospel is not suited to the world as it really is. All it fits is the world within the ghetto of the evangelical heart. The self-absorption and psychologizing of modern evangelicalism separates the believer from God's larger purposes in the world, and thus the worshiper has no reason to look beyond himself (295).

And that means that the evangelical faith has lost its culturally transformative (redemptive!) radicalism. The Christian confession of a set of control beliefs external to ourselves is gone. Wells turns this around into its proper biblical perspective:

The Bible is not a remarkable illustration of what we have already heard within ourselves; it is a remarkable discovery of what we have not and cannot hear within ourselves. Thus, our inward sense of God and our intuitions about meaning are irrelevant in any effort to differentiate biblical truth from pagan belief. (279)

One thing remains: the definition of evangelicalism. Who exactly is Wells talking about? He is not concerned to define his subject too closely. It is enough that it is a cultural ethos, a *tendenz*, a *Zeitgeist* that rings true for us. Certainly, Wells does not indict every evangelical Christian in America. I'm sure he considers himself an evangelical, yet he firmly identifies himself as a disbeliever in the sort of religiosity he has labelled "evangelical." In the end, the word evangelical is incapable of definition as Wells uses it. Without a confessional center, evangelicalism is at best a directionless and amorphous cultural magnitude. As he puts it, evangelicalism is a tradition or community with immense breadth, but lacking in any depth. It is all flavor and no meat. The word stands today as an empty symbol, a slogan referring at best to the latest unsuccessful hold-out against modernism.

While not a perfect book (it is at least a hundred pages too long), it offers an important and provocative analysis of evangelical religion. Every teacher, pastor, and elder should read this book this year.