

David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (1993)

In *No Place for Truth*, David Wells demonstrates how the last two centuries, and especially the last fifty years, have witnessed the evacuation of theology in evangelical churches. He attributes the cause of this theological decline to a number of factors, but two in particular: modernity (with its denial of biblical authority and its elevation of individual autonomy) and modernization (with its increase in technology, urbanization, cliché cultures).

Wells shows the pernicious effect that modernity and modernization have had on the church, and how evangelicals (like the liberals before them) have opted for life over doctrine, and as a result have lost both. His book is a clarion call to return to the Scriptures and to care once again about sound doctrine. Though, this book is short on solutions, it rightly diagnoses so many problems in the church, and causes pastors and churches alike to reconsider what they are doing, or better, what they are believing.

## Introduction

“Let us not think . . . that we really have a choice between having a theology and not having one. We all have our theologies . . . The question at issue, then, is not *whether* we will have a theology but whether it will be a good or bad one, whether we will become conscious of our thinking processes or not, and, more particularly, whether we will learn to bring all of our thoughts into obedience to Christ or not.” (3)

“Unity must be built on more than a desire to evangelize; it has to grow out of a broad cultural strategy, the implementation of a broad biblically work-out view of the world.” (9)

“A culture for whom God is no longer present believes everything. . . . When we believe nothing, we open the doors to believing anything.” (9)

“Technology per se does not assault the gospel, but a technological society will find the gospel irrelevant.” (11)

“The pastorate has become professionalized, . . . the central function of the pastor has changed from that of truth broker to manager of small enterprises we call churches.” (13)

## Chapter 1: *A Delicious Paradise Lost*

- David Wells revisits Wenham, Massachusetts (circa 19<sup>th</sup> C.)
- He shows the effects of modernization on the church, theology, and communities
  - o Modernization traded one set of parochial problems for another set of problems related to the increasing complexity and isolation found in the modern world (41)
  - o In “Our Time” (i.e., the modern world) there is not sense of connection to people or place (45). For one example, marriages are now defined by “many” things outside of the home. The pressures and invitations that culture brings naturally erodes marriages, churches, and all other Christian values.

## Chapter 2: *World Cliché Culture*

“[Science and technology] have become the acid that is eating at the Western soul. The hand that gives so generously in the material realm also takes away devastatingly in the spiritual.” (56)

“What shapes the modern world is not powerful minds but powerful forces, not philosophy but urbanization, capitalism, and technology. As the older quest for truth has collapsed, intellectual life has increasingly become little more than a gloss on the processes of modernization. Intellectuals [i.e., pundits, commentators, pastors, leaders] merely serve as mirrors, reflecting what is taking place in society.” (61)

“It is axiomatic that secularism strips life of the divine, but it is important to see that it does so by relocating the divine in that part of life which is private.” (79)

“What began as the physical conquest of our world, the annihilation of its space and time, the control of its forces, and the exploitation of its resources has now become profoundly *psychological* reality. The benefits of technology bless its beneficiaries but also curse them, because the benefits all come packaged in values that are naturalistic and materialistic.” (90)

- Modernization has built an “inhuman” world. (64)
- The world has lost local rootedness (“homelessness,” 84) and has embraced a mass-market approach to significance, where mass wars, mass consumption, mass education, and mass knowledge create a cliché culture. (76) For instance, magazines (since 1950), then television, and now websites “create nationwide fraternities of people who do not know one another but who nonetheless share in a weekly communion of glossy layouts,” punch lines, and webinars. (83)
- Unity in the complex of modernization is bound up in (narrow) experience, rather than (universal) truth. (77) Television has replaced parents as the transmitter for values (84).

### Chapter 3: *Things Fall Apart*

- Theology has been relativized and replaced. Truth has been exchanged for technique; theology is now a matter of private belief.
- True theology must include confession, reflection, and virtue/wisdom (98)
- Liberal theologians and churches called for “life, not doctrine,” the result was death by inattention to doctrine (119)

“There is no Christian faith in the absence of “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9), “sound instruction” (1 Tim 6:3), or the “pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim. 1:13-14).” (103)

Citing Henry Steele Commager, “During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, religion prospered while theology went slowly bankrupt.’ . . . From the 1950s to the 1980s, religion has consistently prospered at the expense of theology. . . . Among the educated young, however, there has also been an erosion in the cognitive content of the faith.” (110)

“Between 1980 and 1988, 80 percent of the journal’s material was devoted to the personal crises, perplexities, and challenges encountered by the clergy, and 13 percent of the material was concerned with techniques for managing the church.” (113)

“As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized.” (101).

“The great sin in Fundamentalism is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow [in context = doctrinaire].” (129)

“Evangelicals no less than the Liberals before them whom they have berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of ‘life.’” (131)

“The most obvious consequence of thi unabashed desertion of the cognitive substance of faith is one that few have pondered, at least out loud. It is the disappearance of conviction.” (132)

## Chapter 4: *Self-Piety*

- In the place of sound doctrine has been inserted, self-piety.
- Four factors that contributed to *self-piety*: (1) Reformation individuality; (2) The Enlightenment's turn toward the subject (re: authority and epistemology); (3) therapeutic culture; (4) media and television.
- Individualism and conformity combine, in America, to make us radically independent and hopelessly insecure.

The Enlightenment is not alone in forming the modern man: "This person is also the product of the modernization that has been brought about by market economies, technology, urbanization, bureaucracies, and mass communications" (143).

"Television—and American television in particular—is the voice of our world cliché culture" (162)

"Sustaining orthodoxy and framing Christian belief in doctrinal terms requires habits of reflection and judgment that are simply out of place in our culture and increasingly disappearing from evangelicalism as well." (173)

"The sort of Christian faith that is conceived in the womb of the self is quite different from the historic Christian faith . . . [In our day], theology becomes therapy, and all the telltale symptoms of the therapeutic model of faith begin to surface. . . . Simply put, the psychologizing of faith is destroying the Christian mind. . . . The heretics of old, one suspects, would be sick with envy if they knew of the easy pickings that can now be had in the Church." (182-83)

## Chapter 5: *The Rise of Every Person*

- If the turn towards the individual self has privatized the faith; the rise of every person has democratized faith, so that everyone's interpretation is just as viable and valuable as the rest.
- What has caused this? Television is one culprit. Television does not communicate truth, only feelings. It creates a middling standard and unification of minds through its visual images.

"Common access to truth is understood to mean common *possession* of truth." (214)

"The fundamental requirement of the Christian leader is not a knowledge of where the stream of popular opinion is flowing but a knowledge of where the stream of God's truth lies." (215)

"The preference of our video culture for intuition over reason and feeling over truth have been transferred to the realm of faith. Faith that appeals to reason – even reason exercised through biblical exposition – is doomed to failure; faith that appeals to feelings, on the other hand, seems for that reason to be assured of success. So it is that democratized faith, faith driven by the urge to conform, settles into its niche in the world. And that is precisely what, in biblical terms, it has settled into: *worldliness*." (215)

## Chapter 6: *The New Disablers*

- The role of clergy has been radically changed.
- Seminaries no longer focus on theology, but upon leadership, psychology, and managerial skills.
- The calling of pastors today is to be 'sacred fools,' those who look foolish to the world because they believe upholding truth, thinking theologically, and preaching sound doctrine is the wisdom of God (250)

"The older role of the pastor as broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer managerial functions." (233)

"We laugh at those who think theology is important, and then are shocked to find in our midst the superficial and unbelieving." (247)

"A genuinely biblical and God-centered ministry is almost certain to collide head-on with the self-absorption and anthropocentric focus that are now normative in so many evangelical churches." (256)

## Chapter 7: *The Habits of God*

1. The pagan mind is contrasted with the biblical mind is contrasted with the modern mind.
2. Six habits of the pagan mind (267-68)
  - a. The supernatural is known through nature.
  - b. Experience is the vital to understand the divine.
  - c. The supernatural realm was not stable.
  - d. The pagan divinities were sexual,
  - e. The pagan mind had no moral categories beyond the day to day
  - f. History mattered little to the pagan mind; all that mattered was their present experience.
3. By contrast, Israel's faith (the biblical mind) was not only different in content (i.e., that they worshiped Yahweh): "It was how Yahweh made himself known and how, in consequence, his people thought about the world. The saving revelation of God, unlike the intimations of the gods, came not in nature with its storms, misfortunes, and rejuvenations; it came not in human nature with its whisperings and intuitions; it came in history. It came in a history that was external, objective, known to Israel, and its neighbors." (268)
4. The modern mind is much more like that of the pagan world; it finds its authority, truth, and meaning in its own self-referential, self-interpretation. The modern mind rejects divine revelation (the Bible) and turns instead to private experience (280)

## Chapter 8: *The Reform of Evangelicalism*

- Due to a lack of sound doctrine, the church has become weak. Instead of worshiping God for God, the church has used God to gain good feelings, positive experiences, and better life situations.
- What is needed is not a momentary revival, but a reformation as deep and as wide-ranging as that which liberated the church from Rome.
- At the core of this reformation is a repentance of divine weightlessness and a renewed sense that God is holy. Only a deep theology will be able to save us from the modern worldview and the acids of modernization.

"Eviscerated of the interests of older theology, [evangelicalism] has lost much of its meaning," but in the modern world there is a "certain convenience to that." (294) How many church have grown—sometimes exponentially—when they tone down their doctrine and make everyone feel good.

"In the absence of theology, the life of the Church becomes hollow, yet this hollowness is so little different from that of the modern life that it seems almost normal." (295)