

# The Courage to Be Protestant

*Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents  
in the Postmodern World*



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## Preface



This book started out as a simple summary of the four volumes that had preceded it. All books, however, develop a life of their own, and this has been no exception.

I needed to update what had been said in the previous volumes because some of it had been begun more than a decade ago. In addition to this, I had to compress these volumes into a single account. How does one reduce 1,100 pages to 250?

Once this work got under way I found myself not so much compressing as recasting all that I had done and then updating it. The result is that this book is less a summary and more an attempt at getting at the essence of the project that has engaged me over the last fifteen years. And, hopefully, it will be more accessible than the previous books, not to mention less taxing on readers!

The project began with *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (1993). That book was followed by *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (1994), *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (1998), and *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2005). Running through these four books have been five main doctrinal themes: truth, God, self, Christ, and the church. It is these five themes that I am taking up here. Since this is so, I am not, for the most part, documenting the literature and research upon which this book rests since that has already been done. It therefore has no footnotes.

## PREFACE

I spent the spring of 2007, while on sabbatical, in Westminster College, Cambridge. I am most appreciative of the kind and generous hospitality that was extended to me during this time. It was there, in their magnificent library, with its extraordinary collection, that I spent many happy hours working on this manuscript. During my time in Cambridge I also worked at Tyndale House. I am grateful for this opportunity.

Books begin, Winston Churchill said, as an adventure, turn into a toy, then an amusement, then a mistress, then a master, then a tyrant, and just before you are about to capitulate finally, you decide instead to declare your independence by killing the monster. It gets sent off to the publisher! So it was here.

Eerdmans has been the publisher of each of these five volumes. Eerdmans has been a most helpful, proficient, and competent publisher. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to them.

## CHAPTER I

# *The Lay of the Evangelical Land*



Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

**I**t takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant. After all, millions have done so throughout the West. They are not in any peril. To live by the truths of historic Protestantism, however, is an entirely different matter. That takes courage in today's context.

That is the argument I will make in this book. But it needs to be made not only with postmodern culture in mind but also with contemporary evangelicalism in mind. The truths of historic Protestantism are sometimes no more welcome in evangelicalism than they are in the outside culture.

This is quite a remarkable thing. After all, the emergence of the evangelical movement following World War II has been a success story. So what has happened?

Evangelicals started out at the beginning of this period, let us remember, with nothing. They were few in number, not welcome in the academy, were ridiculed wherever Enlightenment attitudes were enconced in the culture, and were on the outside of all the power centers in American society. In a very few years, though, this all began to

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change. Their churches grew and multiplied; they built institutions, started organizations, entered the academy, became a political constituency to be reckoned with; and they have reached out to those in need in a multitude of impressive ways. Indeed, so successful have they become that they have been granted a kind of grudging, cultural acceptance in America, though this is not of course the case in Europe. Never has the evangelical gospel been more widely heard than it is today, and never has the reach of evangelicals been so great.

And yet, at the very moment when the evangelical movement seemed to have arrived at this pinnacle, it started to fall apart. It is now separating into three quite distinct constituencies. Because this story explains where the front lines are, I will briefly describe these three constituencies before I get into the substance of this book. In the chapters that follow I will return to these issues a number of times.

### The Map

Let me now start drawing my map of what is happening.

The evangelical world is now dividing into three rather distinct constituencies. Actually, it is dividing into many, many subconstituencies as well because this rather amazing empire of belief is fragmenting across the board. So my map with only three major constituencies portrays the land as it looks from afar, not up close. The important point here, though, is that two of these constituencies are new, and, like large icebergs, they are separating from the others. They are, as I see it, transitional movements. They are the stepping-stones away from the classical orthodoxy of the earlier evangelicals and, however unwittingly, toward a more liberalized Christianity. In due course the children of these evangelicals will become full-blown liberals, I suspect, just like those against whom the evangelical grandparents originally protested.

### *Doctrine*

What is now dividing the evangelical world is not what used to divide it. The older distinctions were doctrinal. Doctrinal differences were

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what pitted Baptists against pedobaptists, premils against amils, Congregationalists against Presbyterians, Arminians against Calvinists, ordainers of women against nonordainers, and tongues speakers against cessationists. These issues are still alive and they still stir passions. I have a position on each one, and I think they are important inasmuch as each is an attempt at finding the teaching of the Word of God.

What is different is that these are not the differences that seem to matter today. The older map was drawn by differences of *doctrine*. When all is said and done today, many evangelicals are indifferent to doctrine — certainly they are when they “do church.” Privately, no doubt, there are doctrines that are believed. But in church . . . well, that is different because, many think, doctrine is an impediment as we reach out to new generations. These older debates, therefore, give us no access to what shapes many evangelical churches today. The map needs to be redrawn. What is rearranging the evangelical territory now?

### *Culture*

In the last two or three decades evangelicals have discovered culture. That actually sounds more flattering than I intend. I would welcome a serious discussion about culture. We should be exploring what it is and how it works, rather than just looking at polls to see what is hot. A serious engagement with culture, though, is not what most evangelicals are about.

What they want to know about culture is simple and easy to unearth. They want to know what the trends and fashions are that are ruffling the surface of contemporary life. They have no interest at all in what lies beneath the trends, none on how our modernized culture in the West shapes personal horizons, produces appetites, and provides us ways of processing the meaning of life. All of that seems like pretty complex and useless stuff. Pragmatists to the last drop of blood, these evangelicals are now in the cultural waters, not to understand what is there, but to get some movement. They are there with their surfboards trying to get a little forward motion as each tiny ripple makes its way toward the shore. This quest for success, which passes under the lan-

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guage of “relevance,” is what is partitioning the evangelical world into its three segments.

Again and again the issue that has emerged, as a result, is whether evangelicals will build their churches *sola Scriptura* or *sola cultura*, to use the formulation Os Guinness proffered in *Prophetic Untimeliness*. Actually, to be quite honest, the question is raised by only a few on the sidelines, and in many evangelical churches the question barely even makes sense. It sounds a bit like someone wondering about Manny Ramirez’s swing after he has just hit multiple home runs in the same game.

Nevertheless, it is the question that *should* be raised again and again, no matter how little sense it makes. What is the binding authority on the church? What determines how it thinks, what it wants, and how it is going to go about its business? Will it be Scripture alone, Scripture understood as God’s binding address, or will it be culture? Will it be what is current, edgy, and with-it? Or will it be God’s Word, which is always contemporary because its truth endures for all eternity?

Of course, I know that the issue does not present itself in this way. Evangelicals who live *sola cultura* all claim to be living *sola Scriptura*. So it is very important for us to be able to untangle these questions and see them for what they are. I will try to do so as the book progresses.

Now, though, I need to be more specific about my three constituencies. We need to see how the older, classical evangelicalism first mutated into a segment of marketers and then mutated again into a segment of emergents. The marketers make up my second major evangelical constituency, and the emergents my third.

### Classical Evangelicals

#### *The Beginnings*

The first constituency, though, is classical evangelicalism. This is what took shape and form immediately following the Second World War, both in Europe and in the United States. What stood out about it, and what still does, is its doctrinal seriousness. Indeed, its churches re-

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flected this, rather than trying to hide it, as the marketers do today, and this kind of seriousness could be heard, Sunday by Sunday, in the sermons that were preached.

In the United States this preoccupation with doctrine was one of the consequences of the bitter disputes with liberalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Liberals said Christianity was about deeds, not creeds. They said it was about life, not doctrine. Their conservative opponents, the fundamentalists, insisted that Christianity was about creeds as well as deeds. It was about doctrine as well as life. They came to define their distinction from liberalism, as they should have, in terms of their creeds and doctrines.

It is true, of course, that these fundamentalists also came to think as many other cognitive minorities have. They felt endangered and they protected themselves, oftentimes, by walling themselves off from everyone else. It was not a good defensive measure.

Eventually, however, fundamentalism, with its oppositional attitudes, the schisms it sowed, and the intellectual isolation it made for itself, began to die down. Its replacement in the 1950s and 1960s was neoevangelicalism led by Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham in the United States and by John Stott, J. I. Packer, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Francis Schaeffer in Europe. They, and many like them, set about building a movement with institutions, publications, and ministries, the whole of it intent on reengaging modern life and, for those with a will to do so, reentering the older denominations to reclaim them. This coalition was built around two core theological beliefs: the full authority of the inspired Scripture and the necessity and centrality of Christ's penal substitution.

What this meant for them was that faith that was biblical would, of necessity, be doctrinal in its form. This, in fact, was so much more than simply asserting the inspiration of Scripture and its inerrancy. In the early days of the movement, a whole way of thinking grew out of this primary commitment. It meant that being biblical in tone and content was central. From this grew churches that valued biblical truth and Christian life that sought its nourishment in the Word of God. The publications from these early days, the books that were published, and the sermons that were preached all bear this out.

Like all such movements, this one also had its symbols. Most

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prominent were the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), founded in 1942, and *Christianity Today*, started in 1956. Their purposes, respectively, were to give organization and then voice to this new evangelical life. The former was an alternative organization to the liberal National Council of Churches (NCC). The latter was an alternative voice to the liberal journal *Christian Century*.

It is ironic to see the paths these two magazines have taken. *Christian Century* has, since then, retained its intellectual integrity, despite the sagging fortunes of its liberal constituency. It has been bloodied over the last couple of decades, but it remains unbowed in its liberal persuasion. *Christianity Today*, by contrast, and despite the swelling ranks of evangelicals it serves, has been far less steadfast. Its role, in one sense, has never been easier. But it has found its direction in recent years, not by theological conviction, but by testing which winds are prevailing.

As for the NAE, it is now a shadow of its former self. Actually, even a truly viable organization, which the NAE is not, would have difficulty representing the sprawling evangelical empire today.

Like many things Christian, after a while the vision of the original evangelical leaders faded. The strength, discipline, and direction they had given to the movement was lost in the next generation or two. Evangelicalism continued to sustain many who simply lived off the capital others had generated. The presses continued to roll, the Christian colleges continued to graduate students, *Christianity Today* continued to report, but the capital was not being sufficiently renewed. Slowly but inexorably this great movement has begun dissipating.

And yet, much is still strong, noble, self-sacrificial, and commendable in this world. Its most visible symbols, no longer representing the best in evangelical life, and no longer speaking for them, may actually raise more questions than are justified. The fact is, there are still many who think evangelicals should be doctrinally shaped, who love the Word of God, who value biblical preaching, who want to be God-centered in their thought and life, who do live upright lives, and who are not ashamed of their roots in the Reformation. They are the ones who are sustaining the missionary enterprise today and the ones in whom one finds an older, and quite admirable, piety that still lives on.

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It would be quite unrealistic to think that evangelicalism today could look exactly as it did fifty years ago, or a hundred, or five hundred. At the same time, the truth by which it is constituted never changes because God, whose truth it is, never changes. There should therefore be threads of continuity that bind real Christian believing in all ages. It is some of those threads, I believe, that are now being lost.

My view on this, I should say at the outset, is a minority position. The changes I am about to describe have the potential, I believe, for undoing the movement and many of its great gains. Others take a different view. They say we are seeing evangelicalism coming to terms, as it should, with its culture, shedding what has become obsolete and beginning to take its own world more seriously. It is now growing up.

Before elaborating on these different perceptions, which I will in the chapters that follow, I want to explain what I think has happened. This will make sense, I hope, of the whole book.

### *Two Weaknesses*

Although a multitude of voices, competing views, different agendas, different theological perceptions, different programs, and different ways of “doing” church now fills the evangelical world, all of it, I think, can be traced back to two inherent weaknesses in the classical evangelicalism that emerged after the war. These weaknesses constitute the soil in which first the marketers and now the emergents are taking root.

#### DOCTRINE SHRINKS

What is the first of these weaknesses? To become a cohesive movement, evangelicalism had to agree on essentials and agree to allow differences on nonessentials, doctrinally speaking. That is what happened. The essentials were the authority of inspired Scripture and the centrality and necessity of Christ’s substitutionary work on the cross.

Through the 1950s, 1960s, and even 1970s, much else besides the two core principles was part and parcel of evangelical belief and practice. There was, however, a tacit agreement that liberty would be al-

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lowed in all these other matters provided that the core principles were honored. As long as the center held, as long as the grounds of unity were strong, the diversity of beliefs in church government, glossolalia, baptism, and the millennium could be sustained. At the time, this seemed quite safe because the core at the center was strong and because evangelicals took seriously all the surrounding beliefs, too.

What happened, though, was that this doctrinal vision began to contract. The goal that diversity in secondary matters would be welcomed quite soon passed over into an attitude that evangelicalism could in fact be reduced simply to its core principles of Scripture and Christ. In hindsight, it is now rather clear that the toleration of diversity slowly became an indifference toward much of the fabric of belief that makes up Christian faith.

In the 1970s and 1980s, on every side and in almost every way, it was becoming clear that ways of doctrinal thinking were wearing very thin. The capacity to think doctrinally was being lost as new leaders emerged, as the leadership of the evangelical world shifted from the older pastor-theologians to the newer entrepreneurial organization builders, and as churches began to reflect this change in their attitudes and worship. And, of course, it was a shift mirrored in *Christianity Today*.

The erosion in biblical ways of thinking at first passed almost unnoticed. Nevertheless, after a while it was hard to miss the fact that this was happening. No doubt there were many specific causes. Campus organizations were undoubtedly reducing Christian faith to its most minimal form. And as serious biblical preaching in the churches diminished, ignorance of biblical truth became commonplace. But the largest factor in this internal change, I think, was that evangelicalism began to be infested by the culture in which it was living. And then Christianity became increasingly reduced simply to private, internal, therapeutic experience. Its doctrinal form atrophied and then crumbled. This was the situation I sought to address in my book *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* which came out in 1993.

The slide that occasioned that book, however, has continued. Indeed, it has gathered speed and momentum. Here, though, we need explore the inevitable result in only one area. What had started out as a

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strategy for building the evangelical movement in fact ended up weakening the whole surrounding fabric of belief. And it is now worse than that. This weakening process did not stop at the periphery. It has entered the central core.

The unraveling of evangelical truth was signaled initially in an odd series of definitional tags that became evident in the 1980s and 1990s. That was when a whole series of hybrids emerged: feminist evangelicals, ecumenical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who were evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelicals who were Catholic, and so it went. The additional tag — be it feminist, Catholic, or charismatic — signaled that the additional interest was at least as important as the core principles of what defined who an evangelical was. Indeed, the additional interest usually said far more about the person's interests than anything else. The core principles, in fact, were losing their power to shape people, define the movement, prescribe who was and who was not an evangelical.

This weakness has now grown and become more aggravated. It is clear for all to see in the way the marketers do their business. It is being documented by George Barna in poll after poll. I will take this up in the following chapter.

The last time I walked over the bridge that links Zambia and Zimbabwe, just below the Victoria Falls, I watched a bungee jumper launch himself into space from the center of the bridge. The waters beneath are some four hundred feet down, full of froth and crocodiles. This is Africa. Equipment of the kind he was using may not be tested regularly and replaced on schedule. In fact, what I saw were cords that appeared already to have been overused. They were very frayed, and I wondered how long it would be before an intrepid bungee jumper did not make the return journey to the bridge's edge and simply continued into the churning waters in the gorge far, far below.

Something like this has happened in the evangelical world. The cords plaited together out of the formal and material principles became frayed and then, for an increasing number, snapped. They are no longer able to return the jumpers to the fellowship.

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### THE CHURCH VANISHES

The second major weakness followed from the first. It had been a matter of choice for evangelicals whether or not their two core principles from the Reformation would be seen within a particular confessional tradition and lived out primarily in an ecclesiastical context. For some they were, but increasingly and for many more, they were not.

This became especially clear in the 1980s, by which time business-minded entrepreneurs were the leaders in evangelicalism. By then the overwhelming majority of religious organizations in America were evangelical, and of these, the overwhelming number had been created after the war.

Parachurch organizations have, during these years, served the evangelical cause in amazing and beneficial ways. Indeed, when the church has stumbled, it has often been a parachurch organization that has emerged to pick up what the church was failing to do. In the early postwar years these organizations stood outside the churches organizationally but lived within the church functionally. They lived to strengthen the life of the churches. They were part and parcel of this great, evangelical coalition. And certainly it was not as common earlier as it became later for these parachurch organizations to become private empires such as we have seen, for example, in many of the television ministries.

In the 1980s, though, evangelicals began to think of the whole of evangelical faith in *para* terms. That was the striking departure that happened at this time. It was, in a way, simply the outworking of the first weakness. As doctrine shrank, eventually this shrinkage came to include the church, and it then passed over into this second weakness.

The churches themselves were not attacked — at least not initially. But evangelicalism began to think of itself apart from the church. This was not simply a matter of organization but of attitude.

And this sentiment has only accelerated as the marketers began to play the market. Past traditions of believing, distinctive church architecture, doctrinal language, and the formalities of traditional church life all seemed like baggage that needed to be shed as rapidly as possible. Suddenly it was becoming an embarrassment.

But along with these changes came something else. Whereas pre-

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viously the churches had been a focal point for Christian believers, now they lost that place. As unlikely as it seems, many churches in a sense disappeared. They became entirely parachurch in nature!

The leaders of this marketing enterprise understood that they were in a market, and religious customers had choices. The choices that began to be offered by way of competition, however, were all along the lines of not being churchy. This new direction was mightily reinforced by the emergence of the television ministries, especially in the 1980s, not to mention the pervasive availability of religious videos. Church life subsided in importance for many people, if only because on Sunday morning they could, and often did, “go to church” in their living rooms in front of their television sets. One whole segment of the evangelical world decided to practice Christian faith as if the whole notion of the church needed to disappear. Evangelicalism was becoming *para* in mentality, and the local church was about to become its chief casualty.

This disappearing trick would never have been possible if evangelicals were still thinking in doctrinal terms. But they were not.

The truth is that without a biblical understanding of why God instituted it, the church easily becomes a liability in a market where it competes only with the greatest of difficulty against religious fare available in the convenience of one’s living room and in a culture bent on distraction and entertainment. Few demands are made by television preachers, or on borrowed DVDs, and every pitch for a financial contribution is subject to death by the mute button. That cannot be said of the preacher in a church! This conquest by the market, accomplished silently and without any fanfare, has not only greatly diminished the church but, one has to say, has also greatly diminished what it means to be a Christian believer.

The constant cultural bombardment of individualism, in the absence of a robust theology, meant that faith that had rightly been understood as personal now easily became faith that was individualistic, self-focused, and consumer oriented. That was the change to which the church marketers attuned themselves. Instead of seeing this as a weakness to be resisted, they used it as an opportunity to be exploited. Increasingly, evangelical faith was released from any connections with the past, from every consideration except the self, and was imbued

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with no other objective than entrepreneurial success. As the evangelical experience was thus cut loose, it became increasingly cultural, increasingly empty, and increasingly superficial.

This development has continued to evolve. One of its more interesting facets has been the growth of house churches both in the United States and in Britain. These are, of course, reproducing the very first forms of Christian life that the book of Acts records (e.g., Acts 2:46-47), though the early Christians also met outside homes (3:1; 5:12). No doubt today there are good house churches as well as those that are not so good. These “independent home fellowships,” as George Barna calls them, had an average size of twenty in 2007, in the United States.

Whether they were called fellowship groups, or care groups, or simply Bible studies, these “home fellowships” used to *complement* the local church’s other activities. Now, what supplemented the local church has itself become the church. In fact, the church itself has gone. And with what consequences?

It is difficult to generalize since these “home fellowships” do vary. They seem to do well at encouraging friendships and mutual support. They may not do so well, though, in transmitting the full body of biblical teaching, especially those parts that are difficult or uncongenial because the small size of these fellowships and the bonding between people actually make this more difficult. And what of the sacraments? Biblical discipline? Reaching out to outsiders who are not a part of the group?

At this point, though, it is sufficient to see, at least from my point of view, that the mutations within evangelicalism in recent decades have occurred because of its weaknesses. From the earlier classical evangelicals have come the marketers and then the emergents. In the marketers, doctrine vanished and then the church. Among the emergents, doctrine also vanished but then, by way of reaction, there has been an attempt to recover a new sense of church. But without a clear sense of biblical truth, what is being drawn up in the net of recovery is often a strange mixture of ideas, traditions, and practices. It is these developments I need to explore a bit further before we look at the major themes in this book.

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### **Marketers**

The older, classical evangelicals created a movement with institutions, ministries, and publications. The marketers rode on the back of this. They capitalized on all the achievements of the classical evangelicals, but they did so for their own purposes and success. They are my second major evangelical constituency.

The church marketers are those who have followed the innovations in “doing” church pioneered by Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Community Church in 1975. They have been egged on by Barna and his never ending flow of polling numbers. What was begun then has since been copied all over America. It has morphed into new forms and been exported to other parts of the world. Of course! This is America!

This approach, it is said, is seeking to preserve the old evangelical message while delivering it in new ways. Its strategies have been borrowed from the corporate world. The key idea is that there is a market for the Christian message. They utilize marketing techniques and proven entertainment formats to penetrate that market.

This innovation seemed to be the train that was leaving town three decades ago, and pastors by the thousands scrambled to get aboard. Here was the magic formula for success. Though a genuine passion for evangelism no doubt lay somewhere in the experiment, it was also wrapped in the most stunning cultural naïveté. It was entirely predictable that this experiment would, in due course, crest and then lose its attraction, though there are always stragglers who keep chasing trends long after they have ceased to be fashionable. That is what is still happening.

What was so awe-inspiring about this to evangelicals went largely unnoticed outside their fellowship. In early 2007, Barna found that the icons in this movement, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, were almost entirely unknown to the broader public. Hybels was unknown to 96 percent of people and Warren to 83 percent. Inside the evangelical world, though, these are giants, goliaths, bestriding all things churchly.

This was, you see, the very latest thing. Here was a newly invented and freshly minted church world. It was a church world completely re-configured around the sales pitch. Here was the gospel product as sleekly fashioned and as artfully sold as anything in the mall or on tele-

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vision. Here also were churches smelling of coffee and reverberating with edgy music. There were bright and exciting videos. And the professional singers rivaled any one might hear in Vegas. It was all put together in a package to please, entice, entertain, relax, grab, and enfold potential customers, and worm its way into their hearts. There was, however, a generational focus. The generational target for the marketers has been the boomers. The music is contemporary. Usually, though, “contemporary” is no later, musically speaking, than the 1970s or early 1980s, because that is where boomers find their comfort zone. Rap or heavy metal would not be cool.

What results, all too often, beneath all the smiling crowds, the packed auditoria, is a faith so cramped, limited, and minuscule as to be entirely unable to command our life, our energies, or, as a matter of fact, even much of our attention. One church advertises itself as a place where you will find “loud music” and “short services.” It has a “casual atmosphere” but, it wants us to know, it also offers “serious faith.”

This is always the rub in this experiment: the form greatly modifies the content. The loud music and short services are part of the form, but the form, put together to be pleasing, actually undercuts the seriousness of the faith. The form is in fact the product, and in this market the sale has to be done quickly and as painlessly as possible because the customers all have itchy feet. That greatly militates against the seriousness any church wants to have. And that is why a deep chasm has opened between the church marketers and historic Protestant orthodoxy. It is less that the truths of this orthodoxy are assailed than that they are seen to be irrelevant to the building of the church. They are, it is believed, an impediment to its success.

Not only are the bare bones of this approach now showing, but it has to reckon with the fact that people have also become bored with it. They want something new. It has been mainstreamed. The marketing approach has become conventional in the American evangelical world, so now, people are thinking, it is time to move on. Frankly, there is no judgment more to be feared than this: you are now passé. That weighs more heavily even than words coming from the great white throne at the end of time. Imagine that! Passé.

What has happened is not unlike the way fashion migrates socially and then loses its attraction. Devotees of hip-hop culture, for ex-

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ample, are set apart by their getups, their tattoos, their piercings, jewelry, hoodies, off-kilter baseball caps, and pants that look like they were made by a drunken tailor. But what happens when the middle class — or worse yet, the middle-aged — also begin to sport tattoos on their sagging skin, let their pants sag halfway down their thighs, and sport hoodies as well? The answer, of course, is that youth culture has a legitimate complaint. They have been robbed! Their distinctiveness has been lost! Their cachet on the street has been diminished! It is time for them to move on, fashion-wise. So it is here.

When the evangelical world became Willow Creek-ized, the sun began to set on Willow Creek. Its cachet went down the tubes. If Willow Creek could not move on fashion-wise, others not quite so wed to its particular mode of doing things could. And so it has happened. I will return to this theme in the next chapter because the word has not reached as many ears as it needs to that the sun has set on this experiment.

### **Emergents**

The third constituency in the evangelical kingdom would be straining the definition of “evangelical” to the breaking point if its leaders were not themselves distancing their world from evangelicalism. This constituency is made up of a loose coalition of churches that came together during the 1990s and now constitute the so-called emerging church. Here, far more than was the case among traditional evangelicals, there is a continuum in the core beliefs that is so wide that it might be wise to distinguish between the emergent church, on the one end, and those who are simply emerging on the other.

### *Conversing Together*

They are, however, all linked together in a “conversation,” live on the Web. Anyone who lived through the earlier era when Protestant liberals were so dominant in the churches recognizes all too clearly what this conversation is about. It is one we have heard before.

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Emergents, as I shall call them, are about deconstruction. This is an important point. They have not sought to be movement builders because that, in a way, would defy their essential posture of pulling away from everything else. They are skeptical of power and its structures. They are not pulling in toward each other either. They are simply talking, and a few are writing books.

What they are against is often clearer than what they are for. However, they are united in thinking that classical evangelicalism, especially in its Reformed configuration, is part and parcel of modernity. By this they mean that it is rationalistic. And by that they mean it imagines that people can actually know truth with some certainty. That, they believe, is pretentious, fraudulent, and arrogant.

What emergents are against in the Willow Creeky, marketing movement is its emptiness, loss of personal connections in its monster-sized churches, and capitulation to consumerist modernity. This produces a reduced, skinny Christianity with no depth and no mystery. Emergents are *postmodern* in these ways, they say, not modern, and their style is often attuned more to Gen X and the millennials than to the boomers. They think of themselves, too, as being postconservative rather than simply evangelical.

The emergents' deconstruction of traditional evangelical belief and this reincarnation of the Willow Creek mind-set is in fact at the confluence of several other developments. The shorthand for this is to say that emergents are postconservative and postfoundational. The most obvious consequence of this is that a different understanding of the authority and function of Scripture has . . . well, emerged. It is much looser and less definitive than what has prevailed in most of the church's life.

Emergents — at least those who read theology — seem to have stumbled on the postliberals, and this is what is now driving this new understanding of the function of Scripture. They have taken up this fad as if it were the most current, cutting-edge expression in contemporary thought, though in the academic world it has already disappeared.

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### *Being Open*

The name most associated with the postliberals is George Lindbeck. He proposed a way of viewing Scripture that did not require belief in the actual truthfulness of its language. Rather, Scripture functions more like a traffic cop whose business it is to ensure that everyone moves around in a reasonable way. Not only so, but Lindbeck also wrested the interpretation of Scripture from the individual and placed it in the hands of the community. It is not hard to see why emergents have taken a shine to this.

Growing out of this is a far more “open” attitude to other faith traditions such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Emergents are doctrinal minimalists. They are ecclesiastical free spirits who flit around a much smaller doctrinal center and are often obliging of cultural and generational habits. By their very posture they are resistant to doctrinal structure that would contain and restrict them.

Emergents also think more about networking with each other than about working together under the same truth as evangelicals once did, more about salvation experienced in community than in individualistic ways, more about the suffering on earth now than the suffering in eternity later. They are not eager to engage (post)modernity critically. Indeed, they are as much submerged beneath it as they are emerging from it. Rather than distancing themselves from their own cultural world because they have been impelled to do so by Christian truth, they are more intent on simply huddling with fellow human sufferers. They may be willing to critique society for its social ills, but they are reserved about making judgments on private behavior such as homosexuality. What is emerging is clearly a rather different attitude about evangelical faith and practice than was seen before. We did, however, see these same attitudes in the older Protestant liberalism.

All of this, it seems to me, is a version of “offsetting.” Offsetting is what the environmentally conscious do. They worry about their carbon footprint. How, then, are they going to take a vacation that requires flying since that would also involve a significant use of jet fuel with all the carbon left behind after the burn. Easy! In Britain, for example, there are businesses that cater to those of sensitive consciences. Buy your ticket from them and they will plant a tree for you. That is offsetting.

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Here, among the emergents, am I mistaken in thinking that a different kind of offsetting is happening? The loss of truth is being offset by increasingly adventurous experiments in worship and by various attempts at recovering a lost sense of mystery. My view is that this kind of offsetting is an illusion. There is no offset for the loss of truth. There can be only a cover-up of what has taken place. When our knowledge of God's truth is diminished, our understanding of God is diminished, and no amount of contrived mystery through ancient liturgies or gathering in the presence of dim, flickering candlelight can compensate for this loss.

Emergents, too, are standing outside the house that Ockenga, Henry, Graham, Packer, Stott, Lloyd-Jones, and Schaeffer built in that earlier generation. The difference is that they know they are standing outside the house, whereas the seeker-sensitives, the marketers, still imagine they are living inside it.

### The Fall of the Empire

#### *Are You an Evangelical?*

These, then, are my three major evangelical constituencies: classical evangelicals, the marketers, and the emergents.

Can the evangelical Humpty Dumpty ever be put together again? I think not. What was started in the 1940s, both in America and in Europe, has had a wonderful run, has created a multitude of churches and parachurch organizations, an immense and impressive array of scholarship, seminaries, colleges, social relief, missionary work, and a massive enterprise in believing. However, today it is sagging and disintegrating.

In Britain, in 2006, a survey revealed that only 59 percent of evangelicals wished to be known as such. In the United States, too, the evangelical label has become problematic. *Christianity Today's* take on this situation is quite revealing. The problem, it believes, is that the evangelicals are lumped together by the media; all are seen as holding the beliefs of the religious right, all still confused with fundamentalism; and all are being tarred and feathered by a hostile, secular press. What

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is needed, this once-admired journal argued, is a counteroffensive. A charm offensive to combat the negative images.

My view is just the opposite of *Christianity Today's*. I do not blame the secular press for what has happened to the public image of evangelicals. Nor do I think it is helpful to say that this is just a war of images.

The truth is that evangelicals have brought this bad press upon themselves. There have been just too many instances of obnoxious empire-building going on, too much in evangelicalism that is partisan and small, too much pandering to seekers, and too much adaptation of the Christian message until little remains. Too many of its leaders have been disgraced. There have been too many venal television preachers. There are too many of the born-again who show no signs of regenerate life. For many people, the word "evangelical" has become a synonym for what is trite, superficial, and moneygrubbing, a byword for what has gone wrong with Protestantism.

Those who still think of themselves as being in the tradition of historic Christian faith, as I do, may therefore want to consider whether the term "evangelical" has not outlived its usefulness. Despite its honorable pedigree, despite its many outstanding leaders both past and some in the present, and despite the many genuine and upright believers who still think of themselves as evangelical, it may now have to be abandoned.

#### *If Not Evangelical, What?*

If the word "evangelical" has outlived its usefulness, what is the alternative? Here, I am flummoxed. My own labels are too ponderous to be used widely. I am reaching out for help. I am advertising for a new label!

Let me tell you how I, at least, have thought. And there are many who are like me. Whatever label emerges will have to cover a number of the aspects that are important to us.

I am, of course, a biblical Christian first and foremost. But that does not make a sufficient distinction because all Christians, across the spectrum, from conservative Catholics to liberal Protestants, think of themselves as in some sense biblical. Can I be more specific?

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How about a historic Christian? That used to have some punch. In an earlier generation liberal Protestants, otherwise known as modernists, argued that Christianity had to be adjusted to the modern world. They said it was no longer possible to believe the Bible as it stands because it came out of the ancient world that we no longer inhabit. Biblical teaching all had to be updated. A synthesis had to be produced between the best thought in the Bible and the best thought of the modern world.

To say, then, that one was a *historic* Christian was to call into question the entire argument of liberal Protestantism. It was to say that one was a Christian in the same way that Paul had been. It was to align oneself with those who had sought to follow biblical truth as Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Edwards did. And being historical in this way was both impossible for liberals to claim and, in fact, undesirable for them to be.

As a matter of fact, this kind of argument about historic Christianity has much the same punch today as it always had, but few know it. In the emergents we are more and more hearing the old modernists' argument. The point of pressure then was the intellectual world that had enshrined Enlightenment ideals. The point of pressure now is the popular culture of the postmodern world. Modernists adapted Christianity to high culture. Emergents are adapting it to popular culture. Emergents, however, have never heard about the modernists, so the point of being a *historic* Christian is entirely lost on them.

Worse than that, one suspects, is the fact that emergents really have no historical categories. History for them, one suspects, goes no further back than the rock music of the Beatles. This is the music from the "olden days." The point I am making is therefore quite incomprehensible.

What about a historic Christian of a Reformational kind? Now, unfortunately, we have two meaningless descriptors, not just one: "historic" and "Reformational." Singly or in combination, as they say in the PR world, they do not sell.

In this book I am nevertheless going to think of myself as a biblical Christian first and foremost, as in continuity with Christians across the ages who have believed the same truth and followed the same Lord. The period in which these truths were brought into the most invigorat-

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ing, health-giving focus was the Reformation. I therefore think of myself as Reformational in the sense that I affirm its *solas*: in Scripture alone is God's authoritative truth found, in Christ alone is salvation found, it is by grace alone that we are saved, and this salvation is received through faith alone. Only after each of these affirmations is made can we say that salvation from start to finish is to the glory of God alone. These affirmations do not stand simply as solitary, disconnected sentinels, but they are the key points in an integrated, whole understanding of biblical truth. This is what gives us a place to stand in the world from which to understand who we are, what the purposes of God are, and what future lies before us. These are the things that historic Protestants believe, and that is what I am.

This is what I think offers the only real hope for our postmodern world. Not only so, but it carries in it the best help for the evangelical world in its wounded and declining state today. I do not know what the evangelical future will be, but I am certain evangelicalism has no good future unless it finds this kind of direction again.

This will take some courage. The key to the future is not the capitulation that we see in both the marketers and the emergents. It is courage. The courage to be faithful to what Christianity in its biblical forms has always stood for across the ages. So, let's begin exploring what this might mean for us today.