LOSING OUR VIRTUE

*Why the Church Must Recover
Its Moral Vision*

David F. Wells

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Preface

In 1989, I was the recipient of a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The purpose of the grant was to allow Mark Noll, Neal Plantinga, and myself the opportunity to explore the reasons for the decay of evangelical thinking, and not least in theology. My own contribution to that enterprise, *No Place for Truth,* began a line of inquiry for me that has continued into this present volume. I remain grateful for that original grant as well as for the half sabbatical granted to me for the purpose of writing this volume.

Because this book has sought to explore terrain that is not commonly traversed by theologians, I have been especially grateful for the help I have received from a number of people. Initially, I sought some guidance from Kaye Cook on postmodern psychology and from Paul Kennedy on current sociological research on evangelicalism. In due course, portions of the manuscript were read by Greg Beale, Os Guinness, Ray Pendleton, Dick Keyes, and Richard Lints. In addition, I met with the Dead Theologians Society, made up of post-D.Min. pastors, who offered many helpful suggestions on a chapter that I had circulated. I am grateful for the help I received in these various ways, though of course I alone am responsible for whatever errors and blemishes remain.

During the writing of this book, I had the opportunity to deliver material that I had been working on in lecture form. It was my privilege to give the Pedersen Lectures at the Lutheran Brethren Schools, the Centennial Lectures at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, to be the Pinecrest Lecturer at South Florida Center for Theological Studies, and

to be a speaker at the annual New England Reformed Fellowship conference. All of this interaction with my material was very helpful.

Part of chapter II appeared in an earlier version as "Our Dying Culture" in James Montgomery Boice and Ben Sasse, eds., *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 25-42. It is published here with permission.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the remnant of serious readers without whom I, for one, would have no audience.

Introduction

Old ways of belief are dying within millions of minds.

Walter Truett Anderson

This book is about the disintegrating moral culture in American society and what this now means for the Church. This disintegration is, of course, a well-worn theme. It is the subject of editorials, books, and television commentary. It is a cause of concern among many people, and it has occasioned quite a lot of political posturing. Pronouncements are easy to make on such matters. It is easier still to exploit what is of genuine national concern for private gain, but understanding what is happening is far harder and far more important. Without this understanding, there will be no durable solutions. Nor will there be an effective Christian presence in society.

In this book, I have tried to understand. More than that, I have tried to think about the face-off between Christian faith and our morally disintegrating culture. What has this breakdown done to our understanding of ourselves as *moral beings?* For if this understanding is being lost, and I believe that it is, the consequences are large for how Christian faith will be seen and for how it needs to think about itself and its responsibilities in society.

I should say straight away that what I have done in this book will be irritating to those who do not wish to hear theological truth, and many in the evangelical world do not. They have already washed their hands of it. As little as I wish to wave red rags before bulls and further provoke those who took offense at my earlier books, the fact is that the

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enculturation of the evangelical world and its self-betrayal through its theologically emptied-out faith is the reason why the Church has no answer to the national crisis of character. It is also the reason why the postmodern world is not hearing, as it should, a Word from God. For this is what theology is really about. I am understanding theology, then, as the work of bringing the truth of God's Word into lively intersection with the life of the Church, as it exists in its own culture, with the intention of seeing Christian understanding, character, and behavior made more authentic. It is also the work of readying the Church to speak effectively to its world, to speak in ways that are germane to that world. As innocent and as time-honored as my intentions are in this book, the evangelical Church today has little appetite for this kind of thing. That, I must insist, is a mistake. In the generation to come, unfortunately, evangelicals will learn just how costly that mistake has been, because the seeds are now being abundantly sown out of which a new liberalism is already arising that will be as destructive to biblical faith as was the older liberalism.

Changing Terrain

Twenty-five years ago, I am quite certain, I could have cheerfully used the word *theology* without having to reach for the smelling salts. For then I was a young professor, a sapling in an evangelical world filled with large trees. It was a time when evangelical beliefs were more certain than they are now, theology was a more honorable word, and there was a sense of mission that was infectious.[1] That was the day when the trees that stood so tall in this world were usually made so by their theological conviction and not simply by their money, the size of their church, or the expansiveness of their organization. Then, the leaders in evangel-

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1. In its early years, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which gave voice to the emerging movement, was not fully representative of those who later identified with it. It was dominated by fundamentalists then, but its credo, "Cooperation without compromise," indicated a willingness to go beyond the more narrow fundamentalist concerns. Cooperation there was in the years that followed, though it was also limited by in-house fragmentation, some scandals, and leadership that went beyond the core items on the evangelical agenda. The compromise mentioned here is less in consciously transgressed doctrinal boundaries than in unconscious bartering with the culture. On some of these issues in the NAE, see John Stackhouse, "The National Association of Evangelicals, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Limits of Cooperation," *Christian Scholars Review* 25, no. 2 (December 1995), 157-79.

icalism were often its pastors and biblical scholars; today, its leaders are its entrepreneurs and managers, and an increasing number of its pastors are indistinguishable from business people whose skills in finding market niches have been honed to a fine edge.[2] In 1996, *Christianity Today* identified the most noteworthy evangelical leaders who were under forty. Pastors, biblical scholars, theologians, and other kinds of scholars amounted to less than a third of the constellation, but forty-two percent were leaders of organizations.[3]

It would be a mistake to think, though, that a golden age has passed or that the flow of events has only been downhill. If we can look still further back, to the early postwar years, and compare this day with that, it will soon be discovered that evangelicals today do, indeed, enjoy many of the fruits of success. In many ways they are better off today than they were then. Evangelical churches have grown in numbers and size, ministries have been developed that did not exist, scholars abound, libraries have expanded, seminaries are numerous, politicians take note, and the theological liberalism that looked so formidable then looks quite forlorn now. Along with this astounding growth — indeed, we might even say, conquest — there has nevertheless come a hollowing out of evangelical conviction, a loss of the biblical Word in its authoritative function, and an erosion of character to the point that today, no discernible ethical differences are evident in behavior when those claiming to have been reborn and secularists are compared. When evangelicals were small in number in the immediate postwar years, it seems that they were larger in stature, but now that they have become large in number they have been diminished in stature. It is not inevitable that success should take such a toll, but this startling dialectic should not catch us unawares. Even in apostolic times there were those who said, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." The reality was that they were "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Lukewarm, their inward condition lost to them because of their outward success, they were disgorged from Christ's mouth.

2. This change in the style and type of leadership is to be explained by the diminished theological character in the evangelical world and by the growing professionalization of its pastors. See my *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 218-57. It is also part of the transition that movements typically undergo as they move from the "charisma" of the founders into the "structure" of those who follow when the movement becomes institutionalized (to use Max Weber's analysis).

3. "Up & Comers: Fifty Evangelical Leaders 40 and Under," *Christianity Today* 40, no. 13 (November 11, 1996), 20-30.

From Augustine to Postmodernity

In 1993, my book *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* appeared. In that volume, I sought to show how the assumptions of modernity had intruded on the evangelical Church. The loss of theological thinking in the pew, as well as the pulpit, could best be explained, I argued, by the way in which modernity refocuses our interests, displacing the moral by the therapeutic, the divine by the human, truth by intuition, and conviction by technique. As a result, we have not only secular humanism in our society but also secular evangelicalism. And in the volume that followed in 1994, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams,* I sought to show that what we today know as modernity is, in many ways, giving contemporary expression to what the New Testament pejoratively calls "the world." Worldliness is that system of values, in any given age, which has at its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and his truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange. It thus gives great plausibility to what is morally wrong and, for that reason, makes what is wrong seem normal. It is this spiritual reality that is pervasive in modernity and that has caused the evangelical world to stumble so badly. I concluded that what is most put in jeopardy, and what most needs to be recovered with respect to God, are our understanding of his moral nature and his sovereign providence. And without this recovery, evangelical faith would lose — if it has not already lost — its moral pungency and its spiritual authenticity.

In these two books, however, as well as this present book, my angle of vision has been different from what has become conventional in theological writing. Although each of these books assumes the Reformation's principle of *sola Scriptura,* I have also insisted that part of the theological task must always be to ask what it means to have this Word in this world at this time. The only way to answer that question is to engage in careful, rigorous, and sustained analysis of the culture.

This I have attempted to do while following a traditional theological sequence in these studies.[4] In most systematic theologies, Karl

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4. At the turn of the century James Orr addressed a problem that was felt to be more vexed than it is now, though it was far less serious then than it is now in our postmodern context. "What our age chiefly feels the need of," he said, "in the midst of the confusions which beset it, is some way of bringing theological doctrines to a higher test than the individual judgment" (James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma: Being the Elliot Lectures, Delivered at Western Theological Seminary* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901], 14). This was the very issue that Newman had addressed in

Barth's being a notable exception, the work typically begins with a section devoted to prolegomena. This serves as an introduction to the body of theology that is to follow. It explains what kind of knowledge this is, what its relationship to philosophy is, what role reason plays, what place experience should have, and so on. The prolegomenon I have written is *No Place for Truth.* It is not, of course, a traditional prolegomenon but a cultural one. I have not asked what the rational assumptions are for the doing of theology, but what the conditions are, given the nature of this particular culture, that will best serve the cause of theology by allowing it to become deeply rooted in the life of the Church. My question has not been what we must understand about the subject if we are to do theology but what we must understand about ourselves if that theology is to engage our lives.

In traditional theologies, the prolegomenon is usually followed by the doctrine of God. Here his nature as triune is discussed, as are his attributes, his character of holy-love, and his acts in creation and providence. The second of these two books, *God in the Wasteland,* follows my cultural prolegomenon, in much the same way as it would in a traditional systematic, and it contains some of the same themes treated in the doctrine of God. However, it is far from being a full treatment because, once again, I have not only asked what biblical teaching should be believed but where that teaching is being placed in jeopardy by modernity and what it is we need to understand about ourselves if that teaching is to take root in the center of our lives and actually shape the way we live in our world.

The doctrine of God, in a conventional theology, is typically followed either by Christology or by anthropology. And so it is that my *God in the Wasteland* is here being followed by this study on the contemporary person. I am, then, following a traditional sequence without formulating a traditional theology.

My task would probably be simpler if I were writing a traditional theology. Over the last two thousand years, the Church has left behind

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his *The Development of Doctrine.* And like Newman, Orr developed some tests for judging doctrinal authenticity. The bulk of his book, however, was a discussion of the parallel he saw between the traditional systematic sequence — prolegomena, God, anthropology, Christology, objective soteriology, subjective soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology — and the way the Church has concentrated on these topics in this order and then moved on when a definitive formulation has been given. I am not concerned with the merits of this argument here but simply with Orr's observation that there is a natural sequence in which theological topics call to be addressed, a sequence that I have chosen to follow here.

an extraordinarily rich repository of theological works. Anyone entering this field today benefits from the fact that the terrain has already been carefully and deeply plowed. Much of the work in a traditional systematic theology, then, is one of retrieval, of reclaiming what has been part of the Christian tradition even if that ownership must take place, in our case, within the circumstances of modernity.

The terrain I am attempting to enter is not laid out at all because modernity and postmodernity are too fresh, too many-sided, and too complicated to have produced a clear consensus on what has happened. When one enters this world of cultural analysis, one is entering a murky swamp in which little is settled and much is unexamined or unexplained.

The model I have in mind in my own work, therefore, is rather different from conventional works of theology. In none of these books have I worked out in a complete and systematic way the various strands of Christian doctrine. That, I must leave to others. I have been on a different errand, and for this I have had a different model in mind.

My concern is with the Church. The erosion of its theological character, its unwitting worldliness, its inability to think clearly and incisively about the culture, and the growing barbarism of that culture, have all reminded me of a much earlier period. It was the time in which Augustine wrote his *City of God* when faced with the calamity that befell Rome in A.D. 410. The barbarians, who had swept down out of Europe, leaving behind them nothing but smoking ruins, finally presented themselves at the gates of Rome, the Eternal City. This was an utterly inconceivable circumstance, at least to the pagans. They had comforted themselves that Rome would never be conquered, that it would always be protected by their gods. No one was prepared for what befell this corrupted society during three days of ruinous invasion and pillaging led by King Alaric.

The reaction to Rome's conquest was instant. Pagans turned on the Christians, charging that it was their presence that explained the desertion of Rome by the gods. These gods were obviously displeased that Roman society was tolerating the presence of Christians. Not only so, but Christian doctrine, pagans said, demanded that they renounce the world. That meant that Christians could not be good citizens since they had to be disengaged from society. Was it any surprise, then, if Rome, thus abandoned by so many, had fallen to the barbarians in its moment of need? Christians, apparently, were at a loss to know how to explain this tragedy, a circumstance that seemed to be simply incomprehensible, and they were also unsure how best to combat the pagan charge on citizenship. They did, however, send emissaries to Augustine in North Africa asking

that he help them understand what had happened from within a Christian framework. And over the next twenty-two years, Augustine formulated his answer. He turned the pagan argument on its head by saying that Rome had collapsed, not because of Christian morality but pagan immorality. How could pagans object to the Christian desire for redemption from the vice latent in all human nature? The last twelve books of his work, however, move from this particular tragedy to thinking more generally of the presence of the two cities, the City of God and the City of Man, in all of human history. It was thus that he came to formulate an understanding of providence, and of the relation of Christ and culture, that framed all of life. For him, it was this cultural tragedy that cried out for an answer and that provoked his thought about the relationship of God to the world and to the Church. Now, many centuries later, I find myself wanting, in some very small way, to do something along the same lines, given the vastly destabilizing consequences of modernity. There are, however, large differences.

My agenda is clearly more modest. In these volumes, I have been mainly concerned with the business of retrieval, of preserving and reclaiming those riches of our classical spirituality that are especially in danger of being lost. Mine has been a task that is subsidiary to the major business of developing a theology for this time. I have worked at it in a limited and piecemeal fashion, and not with the comprehensiveness that the urgency of our time demands and that others will have to accomplish.

Augustine's work is an instructive case study of one person's reflection on his own culture, but ancient Rome also offers an equally interesting case study of cultural collapse in general. The conquest of Rome has always been a perplexing matter to historians, for on the surface it should not have fallen like a pack of cards before the barbarians. This has raised a question that cannot be answered definitively but that nevertheless remains a tantalizing consideration. What role did the slow, inexorable dissolution of Roman character play in this defeat? Would it be correct to surmise that in some ways Rome was not so much defeated by outsiders as by its own hand? And, if this surmise has any validity at all, should we not view our own deeply destructive social pathologies and the rotting of our national character with some alarm? America seems so strong, so invincible as it bestrides the world, its technology unmatched, its economic system robust and virile, its government stable, and the validity of its laws uncontested. Rome, however, once occupied a comparable position in the ancient world, and against every human calculation and expectation, it fell. Indeed,

when the barbarians arrived outside the gates of Rome, their hair dressed down in rancid butter, their breath heavy with garlic, and their tongues clattering away with primitive sounds, they found no one at home. They simply walked into the city and began their conquest. A fate as improbable as this is not beyond repetition, even for America, if this nation cannot address its own disintegrating life, for no civilization will endure forever.[5]

Some, in fact, see the process of final dissolution as already having begun. The art critic, Robert Hughes, for example, draws a direct parallel between Rome in its final stages of decomposition and America in the 1980s and 1990s. Then as now, many were skeptical of authority and became easy victims of superstition. Political language began to disintegrate, even as it has today, though in our case one of the main causes is that it has to carry the burdens of a fake piety, which is what political correctness has become. Hughes speaks of "the corruption and verbosity of its senators," of foolish old emperors whose extravagant wives also consorted with astrologers, of Rome's dependence upon its geese to protect it from unseen enemies, the geese today having been transmuted into pollsters. The gladiatorial games, which were put on as a distraction for a populace ever more restless, are now superseded by the high-tech blood letting in our movies and on television.[6]

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5. In his lengthy study of civilizations, Arnold Toynbee gives considerable space to why they disintegrate. What are the signs that they are coming apart? Especially pertinent to the West at present is his discussion of the "schism of the soul." He sees in disintegrated cultures the emergence of patterns of behavior that belong together but have very different expressions depending upon whether it is the active or passive form, though it is the latter that we see predominantly today. In its passive form, cultural demise is preceded by moral decay, lawless abandon in which "antinomianism is accepted — consciously or unconsciously, in theory or in practice — as a substitute for creativeness" (Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* [12 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1934-61], 5:399). This is accompanied by the desire to break away from existing structures, by a sense of drift, which "is the passive way of feeling the loss of the *élan* of growth" (ibid., 5:412). This drifting "has the effect of an opiate in instilling into the soul an insidious acquiescence in an evil that is assumed to reside in external circumstances beyond the victim's control" (ibid., 5:432). This is also accompanied by a kind of promiscuity that "takes practical effect in an act of self-surrender to the melting-pot" (ibid., 5:439), by which Toynbee meant the declining moral and spiritual consensus rather than an ethnic melting pot. It is not difficult to hear in this delineation echoes of much of our own contemporary life in America. See also the useful discussion in Jim Nelson Black's *When Nations Die: America on the Brink: Ten Warning Signs of a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1994).

6. Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-5.

Irving Kristol, a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, has also seen a parallel between Rome in its declining years and America, though he works this parallel from a politically conservative angle. The similarity he sees lies in the decadence that obtained then and that has become ubiquitous now, a theme to which I will return in chapter two.

Fifty years ago, Kristol argues, the welfare state was created in America to provide cradle-to-grave security. It was expected to eliminate the social diseases that have become so destructive in our own time, such as violent crime, illegitimacy, drugs, and the decay of marriage. A tacit trade was made. Responsibility for much of life was handed over to the government, and private life became dominated by the belief that each citizen had the unencumbered right to individual autonomy (a theme that I will explore in chapters two and three). "The transfer of major areas of responsibility to the welfare state," Kristol writes, "combined with a bland permissive toleration of moral irresponsibility among the citizenry is about as fair a description of national decadence as one can imagine."[7] And this decadence has crossed over into much of our religion, which has become a largely internal and private matter, disconnected from the public square. "But religion that is a merely private affair," he counters, "has been, until our time, unknown in the annals of mankind. . . . Such religion quickly diminishes into an indoor pleasure, a kind of hobby of one or more individuals, like reading a book or watching television."[8] Beneath the collapse of Rome was a spiritual failure, and Kristol sees a comparable failure, brought about by different means, happening in America. If we abandon our moral obligations and indulge our "right" to do and say whatever we want, we will have to live in a society that is trivialized, emptied out, and increasingly more dangerous and inhospitable.

Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher and ethicist, also suggests that we have reached a "turning point" comparable to what happened in Rome and that today, amidst the moral disintegration of our society, we should begin "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages that are already upon us."[9] That may be the only path toward survival at some point in the future, but should

7. Irving Kristol, "The Welfare State's Spiritual Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal* 229, no. 23 (February 3, 1997), A6.

8. Ibid.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 245.

we be so ready to surrender this territory at this point in time? Might it not be possible that this cultural chaos, so painful and disorienting, is itself the soil for a new planting of faith? Could it be that evangelical faith, once again made serious, once again possessed of biblical truth and moral fiber, could serve America today as it did England in the eighteenth century, when slavery was abolished and that nation was turned back from its barbarism?

I believe that this question should be the constant preoccupation of theologians and Church leaders. One of the striking developments today is the emergence of a renaissance in the writing of systematic theologies at the very time when the Church, both evangelical and otherwise, has been disengaging itself from theological substance. So what does this development mean? It surely points to the reality that what preoccupies theologians is remote to most people in the Church. And the reason is only partly that theologians are more intellectually disposed whereas most people in the Church are less so. More importantly, theologians in the writing of their systematic theologies are in far more earnest conversation with the academic guild than they are with the life of the Church and with that of our culture. If there is a payoff for the Church from these volumes, it is mostly only in the crumbs that fall from the tables in the learned guild. These volumes are largely written by professors for students; with few exceptions, they are not written by those who want to engage the Church as it lives out its life in the postmodern world. This task would require that theology understand the life of the Church as well as the way life in the postmodern world works, and not simply orient itself to the preoccupations of the academic guild. However, those who have attempted to orient themselves to culture as well have found that this is hard to pull off without losing their theological bearings. That, in fact, has often happened. Theology of this kind, moral philosopher Jeffrey Stout writes, "has often assumed a voice not its own and found itself merely repeating the bromides of secular intellectuals in transparently figurative speech." But what is the alternative? Those who have something distinctive to say — and, not least, something distinctively Christian to say — are apt, he says, "to be talking to themselves — or, at best, to a few other theologians of similar breeding."[10]

The task of shaping the Church's mind has therefore been left to the purveyors and makers of popular theology. Popularizing theology

10. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 163.

— that is, making its truth accessible to a wide number of people — is an honorable undertaking. What comes to mind when the words, *popular theology,* are heard, though, is usually something different. Popular theology is a hybrid in which what is popular so often eclipses what is theological, because what is popular typically owes far more to the habits and mental conventions of modernity than it does to biblical truth. The result is that the evangelical Church, whose taste for what is popular appears to be insatiable, is in danger of being destabilized by the cultural captivity of some of its popular "thinkers," as well as by the academic captivity of some of its scholars.

Those who are oblivious to the past are, indeed, condemned to repeating its mistakes. In this case, the mainline denominations and their theologians have just completed walking this road of cultural accommodation with disastrous consequences. Historian Douglas Sloan has described how mainline theologians attempted to penetrate the university. The three most prominent in the postwar years were Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. They sought, on the one hand, to describe and circumscribe the way in which knowledge flourished in the academic world and, on the other, to argue for the necessity of faith as a way of knowing that was deeper and more encompassing of reality than secularized ways of knowing. Their work was highly influential and, against all expectations, the study of both theology and religion gained in respectability on the campuses.

This conquest was, however, short-lived because the "twentieth-century Protestant theological renaissance failed to penetrate the cognitive center of the modern university." Why was this so? The answer, according to Sloan, is that these proponents of faith imagined "that it is possible to be at once a committed person of faith and thoroughly modern."[11] As cognitive ground was conceded to the prophets and proponents of modernity, Christian faith left itself nowhere to stand. The collapse that followed was as inevitable as it was swift.

Throughout this century, the mainline denominations have been vulnerable to dalliances with high culture, in this particular case that part of it which has flowered in the academic world. And throughout this century, evangelical faith has been vulnerable to dalliances with popular culture. These may seem very different on the surface, for one is elitist and the other is not, one is sophisticated and the other is not. Yet they are no different at the point where the dalliance occurs, for

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11. Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 212.

modernity has cultural expressions that are high as well as those that are popular. And for evangelicals drinking from the popular end of the trough of modernity, the collapse will be as inevitable and swift as for those who have drunk from the high end of that same trough. Those who are serious about maintaining an authentic biblical theology "must come to terms with the scope, impact, and significance of popular theology," Quentin Shultze, Calvin College's communications professor, has written, because this "increasingly establishes the cultural context for the religious communities that academic theologians serve."[12]

Our culture is in trouble today, and the weakness of the evangelical Church, the evisceration of its theological character, is therefore all the more troubling. How is it going to address the large questions that have arisen over the meaning of our life? These questions have many points of focus beside the obvious ones of abortion and euthanasia. One of the telltale signs of our trouble, for example, is that we are dealing awkwardly with our conquest of the world. While we feast on the largesse of modernity, enjoying the enormously enlarged capabilities that technology has bestowed upon us, linking us with everyone everywhere in a twinkling of an eye, and while we are laden with the fruits of our abundant economic system, and while we strut the world as its sole super power, benign as our conquest may be, and though we know everything (almost) and are everywhere (at least psychologically), we have become incomprehensible to ourselves. And central to this internal mystery is that we are losing our moral imagination, our capacity for seeing ourselves as moral beings. We are losing our moral bearings.

The consequences of this are now so distressing that we have embarked on a search for self-understanding that is so far reaching as to be without precedent in the West. The search for self-understanding is not itself, of course, novel. The need for at least some self-understanding is part and parcel of human experience, and every generation has its own language for this pursuit. Today, however, all of the older models of understanding are being shelved, and new models, many of them laden with radical consequences, are being tested. A century ago, the answer to the question, "Who are we?" would have been one thing, but today it is something entirely different. "I am my genes," some say, as they surrender themselves to biological fate. "I am my past," "I am my self-image," "I am my gender," "I am what I have," "I am what I do," "I am whom I know," "I am my sexual orientation," say others

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12. Quentin J. Schultze, "Civil Sin: Evil and Purgation in the Media," *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (July 1993), 233.

who think that there are other kinds of fate or that identity is either something that we do or something that we can construct. And what we once would have said — "I am one who is made in the image of God" — simply does not translate into the language of modernity.[13] Today, our vocabulary is in crisis. This is precisely where theologians should be heard and just where the Church should be stationing itself.

From Virtues to Values

The language we use to understand ourselves and our world is not simply a matter of words. It is the result of the interactions of many other factors: how we understand the world; the particular social pressures to which we are subject; patterns of behavior into which we have settled; how our collective life is shaped politically; how our most deeply felt anxieties and perplexities are understood; how we conceive of our gender and ethnic differences; how we relate to our things, to the past, to ourselves, and most fundamentally, to God. In this sense, our everyday language is the outcome of our engagement with life at very deep, complex, and sometimes painful levels.

It is this engagement, I shall argue, that is now framing life in such a way that the most important part of self-understanding — that we are moral beings — has been removed from the equation. That is the beguilingly simple thesis I shall be pursuing: functionally, we are not morally disengaged, adrift, and alienated; we are morally obliterated. We are, in practice, not only moral *illiterati;* we have become morally vacant. MacIntyre argued this thesis with respect to society, and I will be listening for its echoes in the Church.

Few subjects have received more attention over the last twenty-five years than the declining moral literacy in our society. In our schools, no doubt out of good intentions, we shifted from teaching character formation to values clarification. Now we have moved on to a plethora of new but confused agendas, and we are genuinely nonplused by all of the practical consequences. Our children are not only more lawless in school, as evidenced by the astounding increase in crime, but are too often without any apparent moral consciousness regarding their actions. And this will not be easily remedied, since, as William Kilpatrick, the education specialist, argues, "without the sense that life makes sense,

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13. I am indebted for this way of stating the matter to Elaine Storkey's comments at a conference on modernity held in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1993.

all other motives for virtuous behavior lose their force."[14] Life in a postmodern world does not make sense, so the recovery of virtue will, as a result, be constantly frustrated.

Our concern that society is rapidly losing moral altitude, however, goes far beyond our concern about the schools. It is evident throughout the professions, many of which have scrambled to introduce courses in ethics in the universities, and it is evident in our apprehension about the crumbling structures all around us, from the family to the inner city. The problem is not that we cannot discuss moral theory, although even that is rapidly being lost, and it is certainly not that we are unconcerned about our cultural circumstances. The problem is that our talk is now empty.

For over two thousand years, moral conduct was discussed under the language of the virtues. First Plato and then Aristotle talked about the cardinal, or foundational, virtues. These were justice (or rectitude), wisdom, courage (or fortitude), and moderation (or self-control). Subsequently, of course, other lists were drawn up, and the discussion of the virtues has followed numerous paths. However, it is important for us to understand that the change in our language reflects changes in our understanding of what the moral life is about. And that, at a deeper level, reflects changes in who we think we are.

The importance of the classical view of the virtues was that moral conduct was seen to be the outcome of *character,* and it was considered entirely futile to divorce inward moral reality from its exercise in the society or community in which a person lived. In time, this discussion about the cardinal virtues passed into Catholicism, where it was incorporated into a structure of thought in which these virtues were seen to be the basis for, and as becoming finally realized in, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Luther, of course, was quite impatient with this line of thought, because Aristotle, he said, had introduced into the Church a theory of natural virtue that took insufficient account of sin.[15] It allowed

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14. William K. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 27.

15. In 1517, before Luther had been catapulted into the role of a Reformer by the posting of his *Ninety-five Theses,* he had already attacked medieval notions of piety and morality. These, he knew, were predicated, to a considerable degree, on Aristotle. Luther's view was that "nothing precedes grace except indisposition and even rebellion against grace" (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works,* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman [55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86], 31:11). Man, he said, "by nature has neither correct precept nor good will" (ibid.). Human nature "glories and takes pride in every work which is apparently and outwardly good" (ibid.). The pivotal distinction between what he believed and what

its followers to find in their moral accomplishments and character formation a basis for laying claim to God's salvation. On the Protestant side, therefore, matters of moral principle were discussed differently. These were seen as the outcome to a knowledge of God, which was given independently of any internal moral achievement, through the Word and by the Holy Spirit. Godliness, it was argued, combined the right beliefs about God and his Christ (2 Tim. 3:16), a reverential attitude before him (2 Tim. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:3), and a sense of obligation to live well before one's family (1 Tim. 5:4), the Church, and in society. The texture of the discussion was different, but when Protestant and Catholics talked of moral conduct they both rooted it in internal spiritual reality that had to be practiced in external relationships.

In the wider society, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the classical virtues came under fire from Enlightenment ideology, the Christian virtues in particular came under heavy bombardment, and slowly our language began to change.

These classical virtues had always been thought about in relation to the community in which a person lived. To act justly was not an internal attitude but the practice of what was upright in a context where that moral virtue had been put to the test. When we come into the modern period, and as communities begin to disappear, the virtues come to stand alone, out of the social context in which they had formerly been understood. Thus, as MacIntyre points out,[16] the virtue of honor increasingly comes to be understood in terms of a social status that is not awarded because of moral desert but gained through wealth or birth. When the virtues were thus privatized, when they were disengaged from public life, that life had to be governed, not by morality but by social rules that became etiquette. It was these rules that replaced the virtues, and these rules have now been replaced by governmental regulation and by litigation, a point that will be developed more fully in chapter two.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the virtues (plural) had also contracted into virtue (singular). And virtue was an altogether thinner and vaguer matter; indeed, it was increasingly reduced simply to sexual matters. To say that a woman had lost her virtue could no longer mean that she was a habitual liar, or that she had often acted in a cowardly or

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Aristotle stood for was this: "We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds" (ibid., 12). The result is that "virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace" (ibid.). "Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle" (ibid.). "Briefly, the whole of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light" (ibid.).

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 211-17.

dishonorable way. It meant that she had lost her virginity. Some of the Victorian voluntary associations concerned with vice, like the Society for the Suppression of Vice, had no interest in suppressing avarice and injustice. Their focus was on prostitution. In the transition from Aristotle to our postmodern world, the language we have used to talk about moral matters shows how withered and diminished our understanding has become.

At the turn of this century, Nietzsche pioneered what, by a different route, has come to be embraced in popular culture today. Gertrude Himmelfarb, whose principal field has been Victorian England, has observed that morality became so thoroughly relativized and subjectified that virtues ceased to be virtues. They had also ceased to be virtue. They had become "values."[17] In Nietzsche, this transition was the deliberate outcome of his belief in the death of all truth and morality. Virtue had to be replaced by values. More recently, as this habit of thought has passed into the wider culture, the change appears to have been more unconscious and inadvertent. Yet it is clear, as Himmelfarb notes, that today values may mean nothing more than a preference, belief, feeling, habit, or convention — "whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time, for any reason."[18] Thus our values have, in a strange way, become "value-free." That, though, is hardly a surprise, for values can have no universal value if truth has died.

Our society talks of values in this way because relativism has triumphed and because the constant rubbing against postmodern life has had the almost inevitable effect of emptying us out morally. It is because we have lost our virtue that we are left to talk about values. And this has an interesting parallel in the Church. If it is true that values divorced from character become empty in society, it is even more true in the Church. The character of which we speak here is not simply the cultivation of natural virtue but the intensely conscious sense of living morally before God. Without this sense, built into character, our moral conduct disintegrates. That is happening today. We often have little sense of the Holy as something Other that presses in upon us and demands that we give it our most earnest attention. In consequence, the older quest for spiritual authenticity, for godliness, has often been abandoned and been replaced by newer quests for psychological whole-ness. This transition commends itself to us because the outcome, a more

17. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 9.
18. Ibid., 11.

whole and psychologically integrated person, seems to us to be far more attuned to the dangerous and jarring world in which we live than are the older concerns about piety. And a more relaxed and amusing atmosphere in church seems like a better compensation for what we find in the world than that older piety which called for seriousness and self-examination in the light of God's Word.

Despite this earthquake, this shifting of the plates beneath our moral world — and the resulting movement in the Church — America continues to exhibit some social virtue. We are certainly more humane and less cruel than most other societies have been. America continues to be generous in so many respects, and its influence is exercised in remarkably benign ways when contrasted with the way other dominant powers have exerted their wills in the past. At the same time, we are probably less honest than many other societies have been and undoubtedly we are more self-indulgent. But in one matter we stand almost alone, along with other parts of the West. This is the first time that a civilization has existed that, to a significant extent, does not believe in objective right and wrong. We are traveling blind, stripped of our moral compass. And this is true, not only in society, but increasingly in the Church as well.

This situation has stolen up upon us so quietly that its real nature is largely obscured. I believe that what Camille Paglia, *provocatrice extraordinaire,* has said with respect to our pop culture is correct. We are witnessing, she asserts, "an eruption of the never-defeated paganism of the West."[19] Her thesis, which she developed in some detail in her

19. Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), vii. "For me," she says elsewhere, "the ultimate power in the universe is nature, not God, whose existence I can understand only as depersonalized energy" (Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* [New York: Vintage Books, 1994], 20). Defying many of the icons of feminist devotion, she then sets out with brilliant and pristine clarity what it means today to be pagan, and she is far more mainstream than the feminist critics who take such pained exception to her. Pornography, for example, she thinks is good. "Porn dreams of eternal fires of desire, without fatigue, incapacity, aging, or death. What feminists denounce as woman's humiliating total accessibility in porn is actually her elevation to high priestess of a pagan paradise garden, where the body has become a bountiful fruit tree and where growth and harvest is [sic] simultaneous." She adds that " 'dirt' is contamination to the Christian but fertile loam to the pagan" (ibid., 66). Paglia, to be sure, is cutting her own path through the world with a rather beguiling swagger, but many of her assumptions, which she rightly calls pagan, are very widely held. The glowing picture of a sexually liberated America that she offers is actually at odds with the results. See Katie Roiphe, *Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century's End* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997).

Sexual Personae, is that there are always in culture two principles at work
— the Apollonian and the Dionysian — one whose urge is to expand
and the other whose work is to restrain, one that undoes shape and the
other that demands definition. What is now at work, what she believes
was recovered in the 1960s, is the pagan impulse to expand, an impulse
that commonly meets us wrapped in what is earthy and sensual. This
is liberating us from most social taboos, a circumstance that she thinks
is very happy. In fact, what it is doing is eviscerating our moral under-
standing, with the result that the whole of our society is now caught up
in a fatal contest: will our moral license be allowed to triumph, or will
we have to save ourselves from its consequences by more and more
recourse to law and litigation? We are now teetering between these
competing impulses, one wanting endless expansion and the other
being called upon to provide increasing contraction. Our society will
not survive this conflict. This is a theme I explore further in chapter
two.

This book, then, is about the changing spiritual topography of
our time and about the place of the evangelical Church in it. Can the
Church recover its moral character enough to make a difference in a
society whose fabric is now much frayed?

In the first chapter, I argue that there are two kinds of spirituality
in the evangelical Church; what distinguishes them is not so much
different doctrinal belief but the different significance that the moral
has in each. In the one, what is moral has weight, while in the other it
does not. The inevitable consequence of this is that the one has the
capacity to be counter-cultural, while the other does not. In chapter
two, I look at contemporary society and explore the strange dynamic
at work between license and law, the chief casualty of which is the moral
life. In the third chapter, I sketch the ways in which a secular salvation
is emerging through such means as style, consumption, fitness, and
psychotherapy, producing a form of spirituality bereft of moral under-
standing. This leads me, in the fourth chapter, to the heart of this
contemporary development, which is how the self is conceived. I ex-
amine how shame has now emerged as our most distressing emotional
problem. I argue that guilt has vanished and that its place has been
taken by a distinctly modern sense of shame far more psychological
than moral. I suggest that this is really just another indication of how
our moral life has become secularized since the dilemmas that rattle us
inwardly can now be dissolved, it is thought, internally and relationally.
The fifth chapter is an exploration of the contradiction between what
we are by creation and how we see ourselves in the midst of this culture.

I argue that the biblical revelation stands so many of our cultural assumptions on their head, not least those concerning honor and shame. In the final chapter I suggest that there is an apologetic which is peculiarly fitted to the circumstances of the postmodern world. It arises from our experience of ourselves as moral agents whose internal contradictions are resolved nowhere but in the Cross. I conclude by returning to the theme of the first chapter. How can our spirituality regain its moral weight? This, I maintain, is where the hope of the Church lies if it is to be effective in this postmodern world. How is the Church to regain its saliency so that, like those of the first century who also lived "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation," its members will also be able to "shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16)?

Our Moment

These chapters are written from the conviction that no time in this century has been more ripe with opportunity for Christian faith. For the first time this century, Christian faith is now without a serious secular opponent, if it can be allowed that postmodernity is now so heavy with its own cynicism as to be unsustainable for very long. Worldwide, Christianity's major religious competitor is probably Islam. Islamic faith in America now has more adherents than the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Assemblies of God, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). However, while this incursion is real, it is not yet massive. It is localized mainly in the Black community, where it has become both the voice of Black rage and, in its countercultural thrust, a voice of hope amidst the shanties of dilapidated modern values.

Outside the Black community, though, Islam is not flourishing. Among the more affluent in particular, the religion *du jour* is the New Age movement, whose roots are both premodern and pagan, though much of it is so intertwined with postmodern relativism as to make it difficult sometimes to distinguish them. Since neither New-Age nor postmodern relativism has a *moral vision,* neither poses a real alternative to Christian faith, though both remain competitors.

Critics of Christian faith used to set themselves in opposition to it on the grounds that this or that tenet was unbelievable. Today, postmodern critics oppose Christianity not because of its particulars, but simply because it claims to be *true*. This situation is radically differ-

ent from what prevailed even three or four decades ago, but there is no major competitor offering an alternative vision of life in which what is true and what is right are central and defining. And at this very moment when, as it were, the Berlin Wall topples of its own accord, at the very moment when the Church in general sees before it those who have abandoned Marxism and Enlightenment ideologies and have no-where to go, the Church is losing its voice. It should be speaking powerfully to the brokenness of life in this postmodern world and applying the balm of truth to wounds that are fresh and open, but it is not. It is adrift.

This, then, is a book that tries to discern the nature of contem-porary culture not for its own sake, but for its significance for the Church. What does the Church need to understand about the culture, specifically its way of thinking about the person, if it is to fulfill its missionary mandate? That mandate calls for it not only to send mis-sionaries to distant places, but also to understand its own cross-cultural situation and to think in cross-cultural ways. Until the Church begins to do so, it can be no more effective than a missionary who travels to a foreign land but neglects to learn the language and customs of that land before attempting to offer a Christian witness. That is our chal-lenge today.