

A Clarion Call to the Modern Church

Scripture: John 17:14–18

Code: A103

More than a decade ago, John MacArthur called modern churches to return to sound doctrine—we need to hear that call again.

Christians historically have understood that their calling is to be in the world but not of the world. As Os Guinness pointed out in a perceptive series of articles on the church-growth movement, traditional evangelicalism not only resisted worldly influences, but also used to stress "cognitive defiance" of the world spirit.

Now, however, "the world has become so powerful, pervasive, and appealing that the traditional stance of cognitive defiance has become rare and almost unthinkable" ("Recycling the Compromise of Liberalism," *Tabletalk* [May 1992], 51.). At some point, evangelicals decided to make friends with the world.

Guinness pointed out that although we are called to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:14-18), many Christians have reversed the formula, becoming of the world while not really being in the world. They did this by allowing cable television, VCRs, radio, and other forms of communication to infuse worldly values into their thinking, while isolating themselves from any personal involvement with the people in the world who most desperately need the gospel.

"Evangelicals are now outdoing the liberals as the supreme religious modernizers—and compromisers—of today," Guinness writes (*Ibid.*). The market-driven philosophy so popular among modern evangelicals is nothing more than "a recycling of the error of classical liberalism" (*Ibid.*).

The reason most evangelicals were caught unaware by modernism a hundred years ago is that liberals rose from within evangelical ranks, used evangelical vocabulary, and gained acceptance through relentless appeals for peace and tolerance. New church-growth movements are following precisely the same course, and that tactic has taken evangelicals by surprise once again.

Most of the market-driven megachurches insist they would never compromise doctrine. They are attractive to evangelicals precisely because they claimed to be as orthodox in their doctrine as they are unorthodox in their methodology. Multitudes have been sufficiently reassured by such promises and have simply abandoned their critical faculties, thus increasing their vulnerability. Unfortunately, real discernment is in short supply among modern evangelicals.

Like the modernists a century ago, churches in the user-friendly movement have decided that doctrine is divisive—peace is more important than sound teaching. Wanting to appeal to a modern age, they have framed their message as a friendly, agreeable, and relevant dialogue, rather than as a confrontation with the gospel of Christ.

The relevant issues of our modern age—radicalism, abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and other politically charged moral issues—pose the most obvious threat for user-friendly churches. Their undefined theology and seeker-sensitive philosophy do not permit them to take a firm biblical stance on such matters, because the moment they defy the spirit of the age, they forfeit their marketing appeal. They are therefore forced to keep silent or capitulate. Either way, they compromise the truth.

If a church is not even willing to take a firm stand against abortion, how will it deal with the erosion of crucial doctrine? If a church lacks discernment enough to condemn such overt errors as homosexuality or feminism, how will it handle a subtle attack on doctrinal integrity?

Many evangelical churches have wholly abandoned strong preaching about hell, sin, and the wrath of God. They claim God's primary attribute is benevolence—one that overrides and supersedes His holiness, justice, wrath, and sovereignty.

Rather than addressing humanity's greatest need—forgiveness of sins—modern sermons deal with contemporary topics, psychological issues (depression, eating disorders, self-image), personal relationships, motivational themes, and other matters a la mode.

The market-driven philosophy of user-friendly churches does not easily permit them to take firm enough doctrinal positions to oppose false teaching. Their outlook on leadership drives them to hire marketers who can sell rather than biblically qualified pastors who can teach. Their approach to ministry is so undoctrinal that they cannot educate their people against subtle errors. Their avoidance of controversy puts them in a position where they cannot oppose false teaching that masquerades as evangelicalism.

In fact, the new trends in theology seem ideally suited to the user-friendly philosophy. Why would the user-friendly church oppose such doctrines?

But oppose them we must, if we are to remain true to God's Word and maintain a gospel witness. Pragmatic approaches to ministry do not hold answers to the dangers confronting biblical Christianity today. Pragmatism promises bigger churches, more people, and a living church, but it is really carnal wisdom—spiritually bankrupt and contrary to the Word of God.

Marketing techniques offer nothing but the promise of popularity and worldly approval. They certainly offer no safeguard against the dangers of the down-grade toward spiritual ruin.

The only hope is a return to Scripture and sound doctrine. We evangelicals desperately need to recover our determination to be biblical, our refusal to comply with the world, our willingness to defend what we believe, and our courage to defy false teaching. Unless we collectively awaken to the current dangers that threaten our faith, the adversary will attack us from within, and we will not be able to withstand.

Yet, surely, there must be some who will fling aside the dastard love of peace, and speak out for our Lord, and for his truth. A craven spirit is upon many, and their tongues are paralyzed. Oh, for an outburst of true faith and holy zeal! (Charles Haddon Spurgeon)

(Adapted from *Ashamed of the Gospel* by John MacArthur).

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