**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**What's Inside the Trojan Horse?**
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By God's grace, I have been the pastor of the same church now for forty years. From that vantage point, I have witnessed the birth and growth of menacing trends within the church, several of which have converged under what I would call evangelical pragmatism -- an approach to ministry that is endemic in contemporary Christianity.

What is *pragmatism*? Basically it isa philosophy that says that results determine meaning, truth, and value -- what will work becomes a more important question than what is true. As Christians, we are called to trust what the Lord says, preach that message to others, and leave the results to Him. But many have set that aside. Seeking relevancy and success, they have welcomed the pragmatic approach and have received the proverbial Trojan horse.

Let me take a few minutes to explain a little of the history leading up to the current entrenchment of the pragmatic approach in the evangelical church and to show you why it isn't as innocent as it looks.

**Recent History**

The 1970s, for the most part, were years of spiritual revival in America. The spread of the gospel through the campuses of many colleges and universities marked a fresh, energetic movement of the Holy Spirit to draw people to salvation in Christ. Mass baptisms were conducted in rivers, lakes, and the ocean, several new versions of the English Bible were released, and Christian publishing and broadcasting experienced remarkable growth.

Sadly, the fervent evangelical revival slowed and was overshadowed by the greed and debauchery of the eighties and nineties. The surrounding culture rejected biblical standards of morality, and the church, rather than assert its distinctiveness and call the world to repentance, softened its stance on holiness. The failure to maintain a distinctively biblical identity was profound -- it led to general spiritual apathy and a marked decline in church attendance.

Church leaders reacted to the world's indifference, not by a return to strong biblical preaching that emphasized sin and repentance, but by a pragmatic approach to "doing" church -- an approach driven more by marketing, methodology, and perceived results than by biblical doctrine. The new model of ministry revolved around making sinners feel comfortable and at ease in the church, then selling them on the benefits of becoming a Christian. Earlier silence has given way to cultural

appeasement and conformity.

Even the church's ministry to its own has changed. Entertainment has hijacked many pulpits across the country; contemporary approaches cater to the ever-changing whims of professing believers; and many local churches have become little more than social clubs and community centers where the focus is on the individual's felt needs. Even on Christian radio, phone-in talk shows, music, and live psychotherapy are starting to replace Bible teaching as the staple. "Whatever works," the mantra of pragmatism, has become the new banner of evangelicalism.

**The Down-Grade Controversy**

You may be surprised to learn that what we are now seeing is not new. England's most famous preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, dealt with a similar situation more than 100 years ago. Among churches that were once solid, Spurgeon and other faithful pastors noticed a conciliatory attitude toward and overt cooperation with the modernist movement. And what motivated the compromise? They sought to find acceptance by adopting the "sophisticated" trends of the culture. Does that sound familiar to you?

One article, published anonymously in Spurgeon's monthly magazine The Sword and the Trowel, noted that every revival of true evangelical faith had been followed within a generation or two by a drift away from sound doctrine, ultimately leading to wholesale apostasy. The author likened this drifting from truth to a downhill slope, and thus labeled it "the down grade." The inroads of modernism into the church killed ninety percent of the mainline denominations within a generation of Spurgeon's death. Spurgeon himself, once the celebrated and adored herald of the Baptist Union, was marginalized by the society and he eventually withdrew his membership.

**The Effects of Pragmatism**

Many of today's church leaders have bought into the subtlety of pragmatism without recognizing the dangers it poses. Instead of attacking orthodoxy head on, evangelical pragmatism gives lip service to the truth while quietly undermining the foundations of doctrine. Instead of exalting God, it effectively denigrates the things that are precious to Him.

First, there is in vogue today a trend to make the basis of faith something other than God's Word. Experience, emotion, fashion, and popular opinion are often more authoritative than the Bible in determining what many Christians believe. From private, individual revelation to the blending of secular psychology with biblical "principles," Christians are listening to the voice of the serpent that once told Eve, "God's Word doesn't have all the answers." Christian counseling reflects that drift, frequently offering no more than experimental and unscriptural self-help therapy instead of solid answers from the Bible.

Christian missionary work is often riddled with pragmatism and compromise, because too many in missions have evidently concluded that what gets results is more important than what God says. That's true among local churches as well. It has become fashionable to forgo the proclamation and teaching of God's Word in worship services. Instead, churches serve up a paltry diet of drama, music, and other forms of entertainment.

Second, evangelical pragmatism tends to move the focus of faith away from God's Son. You've seen that repeatedly if you watch much religious television. The health-wealth-and-prosperity gospel advocated by so many televangelists is the ultimate example of this kind of fantasy faith. This false gospel appeals unabashedly to the flesh, corrupting all the promises of Scripture and encouraging greed. It makes material blessing, not Jesus Christ, the object of the Christian's desires.

Easy-believism handles the message differently, but the effect is the same. It is the promise of forgiveness minus the gospel's hard demands, the perfect message for pragmatists. It has done much to popularize "believing" but little to provoke sincere faith.

Christ is no longer the focus of the message. While His name is mentioned from time to time, the real focus is inward, not upward. People are urged to look within; to try to understand themselves; to come to grips with their problems, their hurts, their disappointments; to have their needs met, their desires granted, their wants fulfilled. Nearly all the popular versions of the message encourage and legitimize a self-centered perspective.

Third, today's Christianity is infected with a tendency to view the result of faith as something less than God's standard of holy living. By downplaying the importance of holy living-both by precept and by example-the biblical doctrine of conversion is undermined. Think about it: What more could Satan do to try to destroy the church than undermining God's Word, shifting the focus off Christ, and minimizing holy living?

All those things are happening slowly, steadily within the church right now. Tragically, most Christians seem oblivious to the problems, satisfied with a Christianity that is fashionable and highly visible. But the true church must not ignore those threats. If we fight to maintain doctrinal purity with an emphasis on biblical preaching and biblical ministry, we can conquer external attacks. But if error is allowed into the church, many more churches will slide down the grade to suffer the same fate as the denominations that listened to, yet ignored, Spurgeon's impassioned appeal.

Make it your habitual prayer request that the Lord would elevate the authority of His Word, the glory of His Son, and the purity of His people in the evangelical church. May the Lord revive us and keep us far from the slippery slope of pragmatism.

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