

How Did We Make Such an Evangelical Mess?

Scripture: Ephesians 4:14

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You don't have to be an astute observer of the evangelical scene to notice the unrelenting barrage of outlandish ideas, philosophies, and programs. Never in the history of the church has so much innovation met with so little critical thinking.

Giving a thoughtful biblical response becomes harder and harder all the time. Merely sorting through all the evangelical trends and recognizing which of these novelties really represent dangerous threats to the health and harmony of the church is challenging enough. Effectively answering the huge smorgasbord of accompanying errors poses an even greater dilemma. New errors sometimes seem to multiply faster than the previous ones can be answered.

To sort it all out in a godly way, cutting a straight path through the wreckage of evangelicalism, several old-fashioned, Christlike virtues are absolutely essential: biblical discernment, wisdom, fortitude, determination, endurance, skill in handling Scripture, strong convictions, the ability to speak candidly without waffling, and a willingness to enter into conflict.

Let's be honest: those are not qualities the contemporary evangelical movement has cultivated. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Consider the values and motives that prompt postmodern evangelicals to do the things they do. The larger evangelical movement today is obsessed with opinion polls, brand identity, market research, merchandizing schemes, innovative strategies, and numerical growth. Evangelicals are also preoccupied with matters such as their image before the general public and before the academic world, their clout in the political arena, their portrayal by the media, and similar shallow, self-centered matters.

Maintaining a positive image has become a priority over guarding the truth.

The PR-driven church. Somewhere along the line, evangelicals bought the lie that the Great Commission is a marketing mandate. The leading strategists for church growth today are therefore all pollsters and public relations managers. In the words of Rick Warren, "If you want to advertise your church to the unchurched, you must learn to think and speak like they do." [Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 189] An endless parade of self-styled church-growth specialists has been repeating that same mantra for several decades, and multitudes of Christians and church leaders now accept the idea uncritically. Both their message to the world and the means by which they communicate that message have been carefully tailored by consumer relations experts to appeal to worldly minds.

Many church leaders have radically changed the way they look at the gospel. Rather than seeing it as a message from God that Christians are called to proclaim as Christ's ambassadors (without tampering with it or changing it in any way), they now treat it like a commodity to be sold at market. Rather than plainly *preaching* God's Word in a way that unleashes the power and truth of it, they try desperately to package the message to make it subtler and more appealing to the world.

Runaway pragmatism and trivial pursuit. The most compelling question in the minds and on the lips of many pastors today is not “What’s true?” but rather “What works?” Evangelicals these days care less about theology than they do about *methodology*. Truth has taken a backseat to more pragmatic concerns. When a person is trying hard to customize one’s message to meet the “felt needs” of one’s audience, earnestly contending for the faith is out of the question.

That is precisely why, for many years now, evangelical leaders have systematically embraced and fostered almost every worldly, shallow, and frivolous idea that comes into the church. A pathological devotion to superficiality has practically become the chief hallmark of the movement. Evangelicals are obsessed with pop culture, and they ape it fanatically. Contemporary church leaders are so busy trying to stay current with the latest fads that they rarely give much sober thought to weightier scriptural matters.

In the typical evangelical church, even Sunday services are often devoted to the trivial pursuit of worldly things. After all, churches are competing for attention in a media-driven world. So the church vainly tries to put on a bigger, flashier spectacle than the world.

Evangelical fad surfing. Contemporary evangelicals have therefore become very much like “children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). They follow whatever is the latest popular trend. They buy whatever is the current best seller. They line up to see any celebrity who speaks spiritual-sounding language. They watch eagerly for the next Hollywood movie with any “spiritual” theme or religious imagery that they can latch on to. And evangelicals discuss these fads and fashions endlessly, as if every cultural icon that captures their attention had profound and serious spiritual significance.

Evangelical churchgoers desperately want their churches to stay on the leading edge of whatever is currently in vogue in the evangelical community. It almost seems like ancient history now, but for a while, any church that wanted to be in fashion had to sponsor seminars on how to pray the prayer of Jabez. But woe to the church that was still doing Jabez when *The Purpose-Driven Life* took center stage. By then, any church that wanted to retain its standing and credibility in the evangelical movement had better be doing “Forty Days of Purpose.” And if your church didn’t get through the “Forty Days” in time to host group studies or preach a series of sermons about *The Da Vinci Code* before the Hollywood movie version came out, then your church was considered badly out of touch with what really matters.

It is too late now if you missed any of those trends. To use the language of the movement, they are all so five minutes ago. If your church is just now experimenting with Emerging-style worship, candles, postmodern liturgy, and the like, then you are clearly way behind—that train already left the station...and *crashed*.

Of course, I’m not suggesting that all those trends are equally bad. Some of them are not necessarily bad at all. For example, there can be great benefit in teaching a congregation how to respond to something like *The Da Vinci Code*. But contemporary evangelicals have been conditioned to anticipate and follow *every* fad with an almost mindless herd mentality. They sometimes seem to move from fad to fad with an uninhibited and undiscerning eagerness that does leave them exposed to things that may well be spiritually lethal. In fact, the question of whether the latest trend is

dangerous or not is not a welcome question in most evangelical circles anymore. Whatever happens to be popular at the moment is what drives the whole evangelical agenda.

That mentality is precisely what Paul warned against in Ephesians 4:14. It has left evangelical Christians dangerously exposed to trickery, deceitfulness, and unsound doctrine. It has also left them completely unequipped to practice any degree of true biblical discernment.

The sad truth is that the larger part of the evangelical movement is already so badly compromised that sound doctrine has almost become a nonissue.

The mad pursuit of nondoctrinal “relevancy.” Even at the very heart of the evangelical mainstream, where you might expect to find some commitment to biblical doctrine and at least a measure of concern about defending the faith, what you find instead is a movement utterly dominated by people whose first concern is to try to keep in step with the times in order to be “relevant.”

Sound doctrine? Too arcane for the average churchgoer. *Biblical exposition?* That alienates the unchurched. *Clear preaching on sin and redemption?* Let’s be careful not to subvert the self-esteem of hurting people. *The Great Commission?* Our most effective strategy has been making the church service into a massive Super Bowl party. *Serious discipleship?* Sure. There’s a great series of group studies based on *The Matrix* trilogy. Let’s work our way through that. *Worship where God is recognized as high and lifted up?* Get real. We need to reach people on the level where they are.

Evangelicals and their leaders have doggedly pursued that same course for several decades now—in spite of *many* clear biblical instructions that warn us not to be so childish (in addition to Ephesians 4:14, see also 1 Corinthians 14:20; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; Hebrews 5:12-14).

What’s the heart of the problem? It boils down to this: many in the evangelical movement have forgotten who is Lord over the church. They have either abandoned or downright rejected their true Head and given His rightful place to evangelical pollsters and church-growth gurus.

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