

BOOK REVIEW

of

David F. Wells,

The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World,
Eerdmans, 2008.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

A non-Christian in the United States of America giving thought to Christianity is confronted with a bewildering array of claims to religious truth in the name of Christianity. This ranges from the cults, to immediate revelation going on today, to liberal religion, to Roman Catholicism, etc. What is one to make of this? Given that at least some range of interpretation is to be expected, the bewildering array presented to the true seeker cannot easily be accounted for. Michael Horton has recently written very critically even of the subset of evangelical Christianity with his *Christless Christianity*. In this book by David Wells under review, a somewhat broader scope of protestant Christianity is investigated. Surely something has gone awry: there must be a standard as to just what Christianity really is. Wells has written on the subject before with his *No Place for Truth, God in the Wasteland*, *Losing Our Virtue*, and *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*. In fact, *The Courage to Be Protestant* is a summary, rethinking, and popularization of the previous four books. For those who read *Courage* with interest and want to pursue these ideas in greater depth can refer to the earlier four books. One of his main themes is that there is *truth* to the Christian faith, a truth that requires courage to be committed to, and a truth that seems to be increasingly ignored within the protestant church.

David Wells is the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He received his B.D. degree from the University of London, his Th.M. degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and his Ph.D. degree from Manchester University. He was also a post-doctoral Research Fellow at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Wells is an ordained minister in the Congregational Church. He has authored or edited some 15 books.

The book *The Courage to Be Protestant* contains seven chapters. Chapter I is titled *The Lay of the Evangelical Land*. Chapter II is titled *Christianity for Sale*. Chapter III is titled *Truth*. Chapter IV is *God*. Chapter V is *Self*. Chapter VI is *Christ*. Chapter VII is *Church*.

Chapter I opens with the burden of the book: "It takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant. After all, millions have done so throughout the West. They are in no peril. To live by the truths of historic Protestantism, however, is an entirely different matter. That takes courage in today's context. . . . The truths of historic Protestantism are sometimes no more welcome in evangelicalism than they are in the outside culture." Wells divides evangelicalism into three groups: classical evangelicals, marketers, and emergents. Note that his book does not specifically address liberal protestants, nor charismatics, and even less Roman Catholics. He does not completely ignore them, but his focus is on what might be broadly referred to as evangelical Protestants. He suggests that two areas in which these three groups differ is in terms of doctrine and culture. He complains that today many "evangelicals" are indifferent to doctrine. The very area that used to divide various evangelical groups is now judged by many to be irrelevant. In terms of culture, Wells complains that "evangelicals" no longer seem to want to have a serious engagement with society – understanding it and critically evaluating it. Rather, they merely want to pragmatically use society and the trends and fashions within it.

In Chapter II Wells takes on the marketers, as the chapter title suggests. "The conventional wisdom is that seriousness is the death knell of successful churches. In an age of entertainment, such as our age is in the West, we have to be funny, engaging, likable, and light to succeed. So, seriousness must be banished. Preserve the taste but cut the calories. . . . Regular Christianity, many now think, does not go down easy and smooth; Christianity Lite does. A church that is serious, that is still regular . . . well, what can one say? It will stand out like an organ stop, if that still makes sense now that organs are becoming as rare as dodo birds."

In Chapter III Wells considers the emergents. Emergents and marketers may be one and the same: these are not either/or groups. According to Wells, emergents have embraced postmodernism, and as a result they "have become very leery about truth and about those who think they know it." The emergents are more about relationships than about truth or doctrine. "This is part of our picture today. We are spiritual. We want relationships, but we do not want to be religious. Bible knowledge is increasingly considered part of religion in this growing and damaging separation of spirituality from religion. This explains why so many of our churches, especially the most prominent marketing megachurches, give the impression that Christianity is about many things, but truth is not one of them."

In Chapter IV Wells considers the doctrine of God. Marketers with more evangelical leanings will simply be thin on their teaching of this doctrine. Emergents will, at least by implication, teach things that blatantly contradict Biblical doctrine about God. "Postmodern writers have been saying that the universe is empty. They say it has no center. It therefore has no overarching meaning(s). That is the world we inhabit, and this is part of what is fed daily into our experience. What happens to our understanding about God when we are constantly experiencing a world that seems centerless and chaotic?" Wells argues that we need to bring the Christian message of the Bible into this culture, not let the culture dictate what we are to believe.

In Chapter V Wells considers what is sometimes referred to as the doctrine of man. Who are we? How are we related to God? Wells identifies one of man's biggest problems, and that is our inability to fulfill God's moral demands upon us: "being

unable to live as God demands in no way changes how we should live. God does not tailor his moral demands to our ability to fulfill them, otherwise the most degraded and scurrilous miscreants would have the smallest expectations to reach! No, his moral norms are the same for all people, in all places, and in all times.” Wells is concerned that a lack of understanding as to the doctrine of man has resulted in a distorted evangelicalism: “Redefining evangelicalism in terms of the self, in terms of the self having spiritual experiences, finding itself, satisfying itself, fulfilling itself, has everything to do with culture and nothing to do with Christ.” Wells stresses that by emphasizing self, the evangelical church has missed the Biblical message: “The majesty of God’s forgiveness is lost entirely when we lose what has to be forgiven. What has to be forgiven is not just what we do but what we *are*, not just our sinning but our sinfulness, not just our choices but what we have chosen in place of God. This belief in our inherent innocence is belied by the kind of life we all experience, and, more importantly, it is also contradicted by Scripture.”

In Chapter VI Wells reviews the doctrine of Christ: who Christ is and what He has accomplished for us. Life in Christ is the path to true spirituality according to the Scriptures. However, our modern culture has different ideas about what it means to be spiritual, and according to Wells these ideas have penetrated the church: “This understanding of being spiritual sounds plausible, compelling, innocent, and even commendable, but, let us make no mistake about it, it is *lethal* to biblical Christianity. That is why the biggest enigma we face today is the fact that its chief enablers are evangelical churches, especially those who are seeker-sensitive and emergent who, for different reasons, are selling spirituality disconnected from biblical truth.”

In Chapter VII, the last chapter, Wells discusses the doctrine of the Church. What is the Church? What is its purpose? What does the Bible teach about it? Wells compares the Church with another universe: “The gospel is a message of death before it is a message of life. It is a message we live in a world that is on death row. This world will remain there until faith in Christ’s justifying work swings open the prison door. And when we walk through that door, trusting not in ourselves but in Christ alone, we enter another universe.” “Scripture *alone* is our authority.” “Scripture cannot function authoritatively if the church is not willing to put itself under its authority and learn from it as God’s sole, authoritative guide for its belief and practice.” “Today, however, the evangelical church has drifted far from this norm. The doctrines of the New Testament are terra incognita to many in its churches. That is what Barna has been told by the born again, and there is plenty of evidence to suppose that what he has been told is true. There is abysmal ignorance of biblical truth in evangelical churches today.”

To summarize, I will give one last quotation from Chapter VII. “The principle at stake is that salvation is to be found in Christ *alone*, by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*.” That was the clarion call of the Protestant Reformation, and it needs to be the clarion call today as well.