

The Essential Church: Bible or Barna?

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Francis Schaeffer once said “Tell me what the world is saying today and I’ll tell you what the church will be saying in seven years.” Schaeffer should know since he was a product of the battle over “modernism” and “fundamentalism” during most of the last century. He knew the danger of what happens when people leave the defining authority of Scripture only to redefine Christian faith in light of “the vain philosophies and traditions of men.” A little history might be helpful here.

The most famous sermon in American religious liberalism was preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick at First Presbyterian Church in New York in 1922. The sermon was “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” A Baptist with no creed and even weaker convictions, Fosdick preached in opposition to conservative Presbyterians who sought affirmation by their church of five “fundamental” beliefs. All the conservative Presbyterians asked for was that their ministers seeking ordination affirm: 1. the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit and the inerrancy of Scripture as a result of this inspiration; 2. the virgin birth of Christ; 3. the belief that Christ’s death was an atonement for sin; 4. the bodily resurrection of Christ; and 5. the historical reality of Christ’s miracles. Was this too much to ask?

In response to Fosdick and his liberal Presbyterian supporters J. Gresham Machen, professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote his famous book *Christianity and Liberalism*. Machen argued that liberalism was not merely a different emphasis within Christian faith, but a different faith altogether. In writing about this battle within American Presbyterianism in, *Broken Covenant: Signs of a Shattered Communion*, Parker Williamson references Machen’s insights as to the vast difference between man-centered religion and God-centered biblical faith as:

- **A Different God (An immanent personal god rather the transcendentally holy God of the Bible).**
- **A Different Anthropology (That human beings are basically good rather than dead in trespasses and sin).**
- **A Different Jesus (Jesus died on the cross as an example of self-sacrifice not as the atoning Savior).**
- **A Different Scripture (The Bible contains the Word of God but is not the inerrant and inspired Word of God).**
- **A Different Church (The church is to change society rather than to make disciples of Christ).**

When Christianity is defined apart from Scripture God is always less than God, man is not as bad as we thought, sin is reduced to dysfunction and grace becomes an excuse to live as we please.

This is not just a lesson of past history. Over eight decades later American Christianity is again being redefined what it means to be Christian and not by self identified liberals. The redefinition of God, the Church, and the Christian faith in our day does not come from those who deny the “fundamental” beliefs of Christianity but from those who claim a fundamental faith in word but deny that same faith in deed. Who is God? What is the Church? What is the substance of Christian faith and doctrine? If you think you will get right answers to those questions from religious media and churches who desire to morph “American Idol” and call it “worship” you will be sadly disappointed. *Add Jesus to the Oprah Winfrey school of theology and you have modern evangelicalism.*¹

One of the driving forces redefining Christian faith and practice in our day is George Barna of Barna Research. Barna has long advocated the marketing of faith based upon the demands of the consumer. Barna discovered that the un-churched often dislike religious institutions, preaching, liturgy and theology. He recognized the unique likes and dislikes of each succeeding generation. “Boomers” wanted one thing while “Busters” wanted something else. I’ve lost count now of generations “X” and “Y” and whatever. Barna suggested that if churches wanted to draw a crowd they needed to recognize people’s faith preferences. Barna was absolutely right about the success of marketing the faith and absolutely wrong on ecclesiology. Religious consumerism draws a crowd but it cannot build a church. *Selling Jesus like Wal-Mart sells underwear works really well. Marketing to the consumer does draw huge crowds. This would be fine if God judged success by numbers and true worship by experience – He does not.*

A few examples of the marketing and redefining of Christian faith in our day are Joel Osteen, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. I make no judgment as to their sincerity or love for God. I am even aware of some very good things that both Hybels and Warren have done for people with their fame and fortune. But all three, along with most religious media, are changing the essential definitions of what it means to be Christian.

Joel Osteen, with his God loves everybody, God wants you happy, create your own destiny “gospel,” is an extreme example of someone who distorts the God of Scripture while claiming to believe the Bible. When asked by Larry King about whether Jews or Muslims would go to heaven Osteen replied “I’m very careful about saying who would and who wouldn’t go to heaven. I don’t know . . .” When asked by

¹ “The graduates of the Oprah Winfrey school of theology are preaching salvation by baptism in the grey waters of self-enlightenment, sensual appetite, and the new age paradigm of existential truth of an impersonal force that dwells in the sub-conscience caverns of my inner child with the hope of producing planetary oneness.” Steve Camp

King if those who don't believe in Christ were wrong Osteen said, "Well I don't know if I believe they're wrong. . . . I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don't know all about their religion. But I know they love God. . . . I've seen their sincerity." This is rank heresy. Yet, this brand of pop-psychology, culturally relevant, and unorthodox heresy is extremely popular and profitable. I doubt you will ever hear about the God who is holy, a God of law, a God who judges sin, a God who says that there is only one way to salvation faithfully preached by the likes of Osteen. The reason? A book titled "Your Best Life Now" sells a lot better than one entitled "God Be Merciful To Me A Sinner." *Biblical Christianity doesn't sell. The façade of biblical Christianity does sell!*

Bill Hybels redefined the church by creating the "seeker friendly" model of church growth. Hybels modeled his ministry on the conviction that the reason people don't go to church is because it is not relevant to their lives and it's boring. Hybels marketing genius was to make the message relevant by focusing worship on the worshiper and by making the worship experience amusing and entertaining. Hybels changed the worship of many churches from God-centered adoration to the felt needs of man. *Biblically and historically God's people were converted and disciplined by Word, Sacrament, and prayer. Instead, these ordinary means of grace have been replaced by videos, skits, praise bands and special music designed to encourage and challenge an audience not edify the communion of saints.*

If Joel Osteen evidences an example of redefining God and Bill Hybels an example of redefining the Church, Rick Warren has greatly distorted the *purpose* of Christian faith. I recently read where someone wondered how many books Warren would have sold if the title of his book had been "The Cross Driven Life"? Warren recently said, "When you are preaching and teaching the good news, you walk a very fine line where you're taking the world of the Bible and the world of today Now it's easy to be biblical if you don't care about being relevant . . . and it's easy to be relevant if you don't care about being biblical." What Warren completely misses is that the Bible, faithfully expounded, is relevant in and of itself. Notice that in Warren's paradigm it's the preacher who must make Scripture relevant to the hearer and not the Spirit. He more than implies that the Bible is not sufficient to accomplish God's purpose in the lives of those hearing it preached. *The Word of God, preached expositionally, anointed by the Spirit of God, is relevant to the hearer and is completely sufficient alone to save the lost, sanctify the saints, and fulfill His purpose through the lives of His people.*

Machen realized in the last century that religious liberalism was not Christianity with a different emphasis but a different faith altogether. Sadly, the new and improved, change your life, culturally relevant, felt needs, evangelicalism in America today is increasingly something less than orthodox biblical Christianity. It's been said that the life and theology of Jonathan Edwards was "relentlessly God centered." *May God*

again raise up churches filled with people not at all concerned with being relevant to the culture but being faithful to God and His Word – a relentlessly God-centered people!

“The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace too ordinary, his judgment too benign, his gospel too easy, and his Christ too common.” David Wells