

A Glance into the Abyss

Modern Evangelicals Warned

For some time, in various works,¹ I have been grappling with the way in which evangelical church life is changing; rather, the way evangelicalism is being radically altered as an increasing number of churches adopt the principles and practices set out by teachers who are re-engineering *ekklēsia* life.²

Let me say a word or two on what I mean by this ‘re-engineering’ of the ‘church’. I start by giving the church its proper, scriptural name, an *ekklēsia*; this is what we are supposed to be talking about. Modern evangelicals are radically – root and branch – altering the church, turning it into the forum *par excellence* to attract unbelievers – the ‘de-churched’, or the ‘unchurched’, as they like to call them, seemingly reluctant to describe them as they should as ‘unbelievers’ or ‘unconverted’ or ‘pagans’ – to attract unbelievers into long-term attendance at, and participation in, its assemblies, and all in order to evangelise them.

This is utterly foreign to Scripture. It is pure Christendom-speak. The very word chosen by God to describe the saints and their gatherings – the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precludes any such thought. There is no evidence in Scripture of any protracted ‘church attendance’ by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that the first believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches actively sought or encouraged it.

¹ See my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder*; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’; ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’; ‘Turn or Turn Up?’; ‘The “O” Word’; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’; ‘Cleansing the Temple Today’. These works should be consulted for the justification of what I say in this article.

² Incidentally, as I pointed out in *Relationship* – in which I engage with Ray Evans, a leading exponent (in the UK) of this trend – ‘re-engineering’ is one of his favourite words.

Moreover, since Scripture knows nothing whatsoever of this modern process, in order to attract pagans, the ‘re-engineers’ have to go to the world – to pagans – to learn from them, to ape them, devising extensive programmes to attract and hold pagans while they are being evangelised. Hence their emphasis on the carnal – food, entertainment, accountancy techniques, business methods, dumbing down the gospel, and all the rest. Naturally – I use the word advisedly – all this pagan razzmatazz is necessary if the church is to appeal to pagans.

There is much more that needs to be said about this – and in my aforesaid works I have to try to say some of it. As I have already noted, if you are not up to speed with what I am talking about, before you go on with this article, please consult those works.

In one of those aforesaid works – ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’ – I quoted Jeremiah 23:25-29, the LORD speaking to Jeremiah:

‘I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say: “I had a dream! I had a dream!” How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?’ declares the LORD. ‘Is not my word like fire’, declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’ (Jer. 23:25-29).

As I was writing that piece and doing the audio, one clause stood out. Indeed, I wondered if I was going too far by quoting it in reference to contemporary evangelicalism. So much so, it crossed my mind that perhaps I should skip the words with an ellipsis. But I did not. And I am glad I did not. Because I have now come to see the thrust of God’s words to the prophet, and through him to Judah. And that thrust is devastating.

Before I go on to explain, let me digress for a moment.

When talking with believers about this re-engineering of *ekklēsia* life, in trying to stress its seriousness, I have found myself saying: ‘Where will it end up? If this goes on, think! What it will be like 50 years from now?’³ But I have been reminded in reply that it won’t take that long – that the consequences are evident already. And, of course, I know this to be true.

Moreover, as I say, I have come to see that God through Jeremiah had already – 2700 years ago! – put his finger on the ultimate consequence of every move away from the scriptural position; specifically, the long-term consequences of the novelties now being introduced and becoming increasingly common in the evangelical scene. Here is the passage I have in mind:

They [that is, the false prophets] think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name (Jer. 23:26-27).

By ‘the name of God’, we are to understand the character of God, his person. False teaching always leads God’s people away from the true God. This is what God told Jeremiah and Judah. The false prophets were doing this deliberately, intending to draw Judah away from God, make them forget him, replacing him with a god of their own.

While I do not say that the modern evangelicals I have in my sights are deliberately doing this – I think they are mistaken teachers rather than false teachers – the end result of their teaching will be the same; in time, God’s people will forget the true God, and they will therefore inevitably end up with a different god and a different gospel. It is not that they will end up merely (I say ‘merely’, but there is nothing ‘merely’ in the new covenant) with a different kind of church – this is happening as I write; in time, they will have a different god and a different gospel. Hence my use of the word ‘Abyss’ in the title.

This, I acknowledge, is a very serious assertion. But if I am right, it is very serious state of affairs.

³ Indeed, that was one of the points I made when tackling infant baptism (see my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp284-285).

Forgetfulness is endemic in us all. Believers are no exception; we are all prone to forget, all of us. Put ‘remember’ or similar in a Bible-concordance search-engine, and see how many references there are. No wonder Robert Robinson included the self-condemning thought in one of his hymns – a hymn which is sung so very often:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love.*

In light of this, you can see the reasoning behind Christ’s gift of the Spirit to his first disciples. As he himself explained:

The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).

Christ did not give his Spirit aimlessly. Evidently, the apostles needed reminders. So do we.

And Peter certainly did his bit in this regard:

I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body (2 Pet. 1:1-13).

Forgetfulness is nothing new. Israel was always prone to forget God (Judg. 3:7; 8:33-34), and that as a result of listening to false teaching (Jer. 9:14) – even though God had warned them against it (Deut. 4:9). And that takes us back to Jeremiah 23:26-27: ‘They [that is, the false prophets] think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name’. Whatever the motive, bad teaching always leads to bad practice; specifically, it leaves men with a wrong view of God.

Charles Ellicott on 1 Corinthians 15:33:

Words that seem harmless, because they float lightly like thistledown, may bear in them a seed of evil which may take root and bring forth evil fruit.

Yes, and one of those ‘evil fruits’ is the forgetting of God, replacing him with a god of our own. Likewise with the gospel.

Albert Barnes on the same verse:

The sentiment of the passage is that the contact of evil-minded men, or that the close friendship and conversation of those who hold erroneous opinions... tends to corrupt the morals, the heart, the sentiments of others. The particular thing to which Paul here applies it is the subject of the resurrection. Such contact would tend to corrupt the simplicity of their faith, and pervert their views of the truth of the gospel, and thus corrupt their lives. It is always true that such contact has a pernicious effect on the mind and the heart.

Yes, and one of those ‘pernicious effects’ is the setting up of a god and a gospel of our own.

‘Scaremongering!’ I hear the retort of the modern evangelical. ‘We will never forsake God, never invent our own gospel!’ Oh? Such people should bear in mind what Paul said to the Corinthians. Having set out some dire examples from Israel’s history – examples of their apostasy – he went on:

These things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:11-12).

Oh no! The danger is very real, make no mistake about it.

Furthermore, we should never forget how quickly the Galatians (and Paul’s letter to them was the first to be written, please remember) departed from God and the gospel in this respect:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be under God’s curse! (Gal. 1:6-9).

In our day, as an inevitable result of this re-engineering of the *ekklēsia*, the scriptural distinctives are being whittled away. With the passing of time, those distinctives will become more and more vague, and increasingly become a distant – and fading – memory in the minds of believers. We shall, in time, lose them. A generation will grow up who never knew them. The real, true, scriptural God, Christ and gospel, will be lost in the mists of antiquity.

‘But since so many evangelicals are adopting these new methods which are being taught by eminent teachers, it must be OK! In any case, look how it works! Look at the number of people attending such churches!’

How wrong can one be? Numbers are of no importance here. If history teaches us anything, it certainly teaches us that the majority is not always right. The reverse is often the case! We know that false prophets had numbers (prophets and devotees) on their side; for instance, there were 850 versus Elijah (1 Kings 18:19), and about 400 against Micaiah (1 Kings 22:6).

Believers must always get back to Scripture; that is the scriptural method, that is the scriptural protection. God surely designed preaching and the ordinances (baptism and the supper) with this in mind – God constantly taking us back to Scripture, back to the God of Scripture, back to the Christ of Scripture, back to the gospel of Scripture. Take the supper. Christ could not have been more explicit: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19). Yes, we must never move away from the God of Scripture and his gospel.

Satan knows this. No wonder, then, that this principle is always under attack. Paul warned Timothy of it, telling him what he should do about it:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled,

they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim. 4:1-4; see also Tit. 1:13-14).

Today, it is not ‘myths’ that I see warping the *ekklēsia*; at least, that is not my chief concern here. Rather, evangelical re-engineers are looking to pagans – McDonalds, Starbucks, football managers, and the like – for their principles and practices, and these re-engineers by their teaching – conferences, discourses and books – are having huge success. And when I say ‘they’, I mean both the teachers and the taught. But it will not be only pagan principles and practices they have to buy into: they will end up with their gods and their gospel.

The fact is, it is already happening!

The modern emphasis is not on God – his sovereign intervention – but on our activity, what we do, what we devise, what our management schemes can produce.

My point is simple and stark. I say that many evangelicals are seriously altering *ekklēsia* life, doing so by tampering with its biblical character, mandate and practice. This will have a devastating long-term effect. The ultimate result will be that believers end up with a different god and a different gospel.

We know our responsibility. We have to stick with the old paths and the old gospel – as God commanded Judah through Jeremiah:

Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you shall find rest for your souls.

Alas, we know Judah’s response. As Jeremiah records: ‘But they said: “We will not walk in it”’ (Jer. 6:16).

What will be our response? What will be yours?

We have a clear-cut choice. We either keep faith with God – the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and exalt him – by word and practice – or we invent a new god, or allow one to be invented for us. Do we want the real, scriptural, Lord Jesus Christ, or the new, sentimental Jesus? Is

God a God of judgment as well as mercy, or a kindly, ineffective old gentleman who smiles benignly upon all? And that is only two of a host of questions that need to be asked – and answered!

To bring this article to a close: I say that if things go on as they are, we shall end up with not only a different *ekklēsia*, but a different god and a different gospel. It is happening already. And it is devastating. It is worse. It is damning and damnable: ‘damning’ because anything less than the gospel has no saving power, and ‘damnable’ because every teacher is responsible and accountable to God for what he teaches – and what he fails to teach (Ezek. 33:1-20; Jas. 3:1).