

LOSING OUR VIRTUE. WHY THE CHURCH MUST RECOVER ITS MORAL VISION

In 1973 therapy guru Karl Menninger made headlines in the U.S. needling his fellow practitioners in psychiatry with a book titled: *WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?* Already then “sin” was gone from psychiatric vocabulary and fast slipping away in US common culture as well. Now 25 years later David Wells poses the same question to his fellow Evangelicals in America, although you might not initially hear that in the book’s title. But when Wells speaks of losing our “virtue” and recovering “moral vision,” that is what he’s talking about.

Our common American culture, now “post modern” with no meta-story of any sort to hold things together any more has no receiving set, no computer screen, with which to register, let alone comprehend, what is meant by virtue or moral vision. Put simply, values have replaced virtue, and my values are good (enough) for me just as yours are for you. But that either mine or yours has some referent to a larger reality, a “bigger” story, than just each of our own—maybe even to God? That makes no sense in the culture of daily life in these United States. The same is true of the word “moral,” which signals that some things are right and some things wrong, because, well, because they just are! For that too you need an overarching bigger umbrella of meaning and conviction—in a word, God. The initial role that God fulfills in our inhabited world after the Fall—ala Genesis 3—is that of critic. When God’s evaluative “no” is addressed to anything about us, that’s what sin is. But God’s not on the screen in today’s culture, and surely not as critical evaluator. Therefore no wonder that sin has disappeared too.

Although Wells is masterful in reviewing and analyzing the wealth of up-to-date cultural analysis—200-plus titles listed in the bibliography—available today, his addressee is American Evangelical Christianity, and his jeremiad is that it too in large measure has appropriated that sin-less, virtue-less, no-moral-vision culture, and willy nilly is promoting it with its own (alleged) Christian version. Those are strong words, but they come from one who is an Evangelical insider. Wells is the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. This volume is the third in a series to jolt Evangelicals back to their agenda vis-a-vis the counter religion that permeates America. In the tradition of classical systematic theology Wells' first volume was a Prolegomena [NO PLACE FOR TRUTH], the second about God [GOD IN THE WASTELAND], and this third one about Sin and Redemption.

I was surprised to see that Luther was Wells' most cited source for articulating what sin is: our chronic refusal to acknowledge God as critic and 'fess up to his criticism, and a concomitant self-incurvature drawing on resources of the self to do things "my way." After having appropriated Luther for portraying sin, it came as no surprise that Wells proposed the "theology of the cross" as the good news that takes sin away.

Wells makes a compelling case to illustrate the Evangelical sellout to America's sin-less culture. Correlative with sin's "real absence," of course, is any real need for the "real presence" of a theology of the cross either. He analyzes the hymnody of "seeker service" worship and finds that God's serious critique of anyone at all is soft-pedalled to keep the service "seeker-friendly." The Good News that fits such shallow diagnosis is, of course, "What a friend we have in Jesus."

Then there's sociologist Marsha Witten's 1993 study, a

“structured discourse analysis” of 47 sermons from Presbyterian and Southern Baptist pulpits on the text of the Prodigal Son and his grumpy older brother. Her book’s title gives it away: ALL IS FORGIVEN: THE SECULAR MESSAGE IN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM. “Most disconcerting . . . is the unselfconscious way in which it [i.e., minimizing sin] was accomplished, and hence the bargain of having biblical truth on modern terms was held out with utter sincerity. . . . A common ploy was to resort to therapeutic language. In so doing the sermons position the listeners . . . as vicarious clients in a mass session of Rogerian therapy, as the talk displays a style of therapeutic warmth, acceptance, and tolerance. . . . Pity in a therapeutic world, takes the place which judgment does in a moral world. . . . We can hear the story from a distance and in a way that asks that we make few or no judgments about ourselves.”

If Jesus intended us to hear that both of these sons were sinners, one a crass hell-raiser, the other a subtle secret legalist, but both in rebellion against their father, it’s not in these sermons. “Here, in this stream of modern spirituality, the self is understood in terms of psychology. The self is unhappy, not so much because of sin, as a lack of realization, or an inability to adjust to the social environment. So conversion in these sermons was presented as incorporating God into the self so that the self could have more meaningful relations with others. . . . The biblical teaching about sin is thus domesticated to accommodate secular notions about the self.”

Wells gets even feistier. He takes on two of the Evangelical Goliaths of our day: Schuller and his Crystal Cathedral theology and the mega-church theology of “market-driven churches like Willow Creek.” First Schuller. “Behind his Christian parroting of Disneyland . . . stands a message that is thoroughly American and ubiquitous in the culture. It is a message, not about sin,

but self-esteem. . . . Sin, Schuller discovered, is really nothing more than poor self-image and salvation is its reversal." And after that discovery "the language of sin was quickly banished from the Crystal Cathedral, as were all penitential prayers, and in their place came the therapeutic language. Many of the Psalms could therefore not be read in public, because they are unhappily forthright about sin and God's judgment upon it."

Then the market-driven mega-churches. Wells proposes that "these churches have become like hermit crabs, which walk around concealed within a shell. Hidden beneath the outer shell—the corporate style that disguises the churchly business that is supposed to be going on, the mall-like atmosphere in which faith is bought and sold like any other commodity, the relaxed, country club atmosphere—is the little animal who supposedly is really evangelical. As it moves from rock pool to rock pool, all we can see are the little legs—the most minimal doctrinal substance—that protrude from under the shell. Is this substance enough to sustain people amidst life's fierce trials? Is it enough to preserve biblical identity in these churches in the decades ahead? . . . Can the Church view people as consumers without inevitably forgetting that they are sinners? Can the Church promote the Gospel as a product and not forget that those who buy it must repent? Can the Church market itself and not forget that it does not belong to itself but to Christ? Can the Church pursue success in the marketplace and not lose its biblical foundations?" Wells has even more such questions and at the end of them all he says (sadly): "I think not."

When the Israelites moved into Canaan, their faith in Yahweh was under constant assault from Baalization. Not that the outsiders tried to insinuate it into the Israelites' theology. Culture and the "cultus" it brings with it are much more subtle, so subtle that the Israelites themselves appropriated it eagerly,

seemingly oblivious to the fact that it was an “other” gospel. Wells sees Evangelical Christianity and American culture engaged in this same dance. For the Evangelical church it is a dance of death. His alternative is “mere words,” but both words: God’s word of critique, even for our frazzled selves participating in the cultus of our culture, and then the theology of the cross, the veritable balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick self. Is there any other option, Christian option, in such a time as this—for any community of Christians calling themselves evangelical? I think not.

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