

RIGHT THINKING IN A CHURCH GONE ASTRAY

NATHAN BUSENITZ
GENERAL EDITOR



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Foreword

JOHN MACARTHUR

The world is getting worse.

Read the morning paper, turn on the evening news, or log on to your favorite news website at any point in between, and you're certain to catch a glimpse of the chaos that characterizes contemporary society. Biblical principles and Christian moral values are under assault like never before in recent history. What Scripture identifies as sin, modern culture celebrates under the guise of personal liberty. Meanwhile, those who boldly proclaim biblical truth are mocked as being intolerant, ignorant, and irrelevant.

The downward spiral taking place in America and other western societies is articulated by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32. In that passage, Paul explains how the judgment of God affects those who reject Him. Having suppressed the truth in unrighteousness, they are without excuse. Therefore, God gives them over to degrading passions, including nature worship (verse 25) and homosexuality (verses 26-27). A society under divine judgment begins to self-destruct as God allows rebellious people to run headlong into sin. As Paul explains,

God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not

only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Paul's words, penned two millennia ago, provide a fitting description of the state of American culture today. It is no longer a question about whether or not America will fall under God's judgment. The reality is that such judgment has already begun.

People often ask me if I'm surprised by the accelerated rate of cultural deterioration taking place. My answer to them is simple. The New Testament teaches that the world will grow increasingly worse before the Lord returns. So no, I'm not surprised, nor am I overly concerned. The Lord Jesus told His disciples that they would be hated by the world. Those who follow Jesus should not be shocked or dismayed if they are persecuted by an unbelieving society. Their hope is not in this world anyway. They know they will one day see their Savior face to face. When He comes back to this earth, He will make all things right. That is their blessed hope.

So I'm not shocked by secular culture's precipitous decline. But there is one trend I find both surprising and deeply concerning—namely, the downward trajectory of the church. If there were ever a time when the church needs to distinguish itself from the world, standing firm in its commitment to biblical truth and sound doctrine, this is that time. Rather than succumbing to secular pressures, or camouflaging itself to blend in with the world, the church ought to be boldly shining the light of the gospel into the kingdom of darkness. Now is not the time for compromise, but for courage and conviction.

Sadly, the broader evangelical church finds itself unprepared for the storm clouds of persecution gathering on the horizon. The net effect of weak theology, shallow preaching, syrupy sentimentalism in worship, and a consumer-driven approach to ministry has left the church vulnerable and infirm. Too many preachers are more concerned with being popular than with rightly dividing the Word of truth. Too many Christian universities care more about federal funding than they do about upholding biblical morality. Too many seminaries are

abandoning their evangelical heritage to maintain a façade of intellectual respectability. And too many churches are nothing more than glorified youth events, designed to draw a crowd but devoid of the biblical qualities that define a church. In many ways, the evangelical church has gone astray.

When the Lord Jesus addressed the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2–3, He commanded those congregations that had strayed into apathy, worldliness, and false teaching to repent and return (Revelation 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19). Churches today ought to heed that same warning. As Christ Himself repeatedly states, “He who has an ear, let him hear” (Rev. 2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Those who fail to listen will face His hand of discipline.

The church today is in need of a serious wakeup call. *Right Thinking in a Church Gone Astray* not only provides that wakeup call, it also offers a biblical framework for how to evaluate some of the key issues in contemporary evangelicalism. The book’s contributors are men whom I trust, having worked alongside all of them in ministry at either Grace Community Church or The Master’s University & Seminary. Hence, I heartily recommend this resource to both church leaders and laypeople looking to honor Christ and think biblically in spite of the confusion that persists both inside and outside the church.

The world is indeed spiraling down at breakneck speed; and to a significant degree, the church is going with it. Nonetheless, believers can rest in knowing that Christ promised to build His church, declaring that the gates of death and hell would never prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Though dark days may be on the horizon, at least for the church in America, the true church of Jesus Christ will never be defeated or destroyed. All who belong to Him will triumph, even in death. The present may seem bleak, but the future remains glorious.

As believers, our hope is not diminished. When this life is over, we will gather with all the saints of every age to worship the Lamb around His throne. In the meantime we need to arm ourselves with biblical truth and right thinking as we press on for the glory of Christ and the advance of His kingdom. This book will help you do exactly that.



SECTION I:

THE **CHURCH**
AND **CONTEMPORARY**
ISSUES

When the Church Goes Astray

*Evangelicalism's Misguided Quest for Popularity and Prestige*¹

NATHAN BUSENITZ

Over recent decades, evangelicals have sought to influence society through academic respectability, political activism, and cultural accommodation. Sadly, when this quest for influence has been prioritized above gospel faithfulness, it has had devastating consequences—leading to doctrinal compromise and a diminished testimony to the lost. This chapter calls Christians to remember that God measures success not in terms of popularity or numbers, but in terms of faithfulness to Him.

Since its inception, the American evangelical movement has been characterized by an enthusiastic quest for greater influence in society. “New Evangelicalism,” as it was called in the 1940s, was marked from the outset by a desire for a louder voice, bigger platform, and more prestigious position in American culture than had been afforded its predecessor: the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. In order to achieve higher levels of influence, evangelicals sought to make their movement academically respectable, politically powerful, and culturally relevant.

Generally speaking, evangelical influence is a good thing. Historically, the word *evangelical* comes from the Greek word, *euangelion*, which means “gospel.” All believers want to see the gospel message have greater influence in the world. That is the heart of the Great Commission—to proclaim the good news of salvation to people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Insofar as “evangelical influence” means influence for the gospel, it represents a positive development. But when evangelicals become so focused on gaining academic prestige, political clout, or

cultural popularity that they compromise the purity of the gospel in the process, then the quest for influence inevitably leads to disaster.

In his article “The Myth of Influence,” Robert Godfrey explains how the quest for influence can lead to problems. He writes,

For a long time, I have felt that the cause of biblical Christianity has been undermined in our time by sincere people who engage in unbiblical activities for the sake of being an influence. The sad and ironic result of those actions has been harm to the cause of Christ and little or no good influence has actually occurred. The myth of influence seduces Christians into believing that by compromising important theological truths more people can be influenced for Christ.²

He continues,

I am not opposed to the idea of trying to be an influence... Christians should hope, pray, and work to be a godly influence wherever they can in this world...The danger comes, however, when Christians adopt a notion of influence derived from the world of politics or business. That world sees influence in relation to power, money, numbers, and success. Compromise, cooperation, and intentional ambiguity are all methods used to achieve influence in this world. But should Christians adopt strategies and set goals that compromise basic elements of their faith in the name of influence?³

From a biblical standpoint, the answer to that question is clearly no. Yet the temptation to compromise for the sake of influence is alive and well in the modern church. As a result, the quest for influence is sometimes used to justify compromise. For example, the abandonment of core evangelical beliefs, like the inerrancy of Scripture, is excused as long as it gains credibility with the secular academy. Cooperation with unbelievers, including Roman Catholics and Mormons, is applauded provided it achieves the desired political outcome. And

worldly methods in the church are justified as long as they seem culturally relevant and draw large crowds.

Such examples may be prevalent in contemporary evangelicalism, but they illustrate a fatally flawed way of thinking—one that prioritizes *influence* over *faithfulness*. Scripture's priority structure is precisely the opposite. *Faithfulness* is the true standard of success (Matthew 28:21, 23). Those who have success are those who are faithful to the Lord and His Word (cf. Joshua 1:7-8; Psalm 1:1-3). They refuse to compromise their commitment to the truth, even if doing so makes them unpopular or seem out of touch.

By way of illustration, consider the difference between two Old Testament prophets, Jonah and Jeremiah. Jonah was a man who had great influence. His ministry had incredible numeric results; yet he often exhibited a lack of faithfulness. On the other hand, Jeremiah's ministry had almost no visible fruit, even though he remained true to his calling. From the world's perspective, Jonah seemed to have greater success. But from God's perspective, Jeremiah's ministry was far more successful than Jonah's. Jeremiah prioritized faithfulness over influence. So did the apostle Paul, and every other notable hero of the faith throughout Scripture. But contemporary evangelicalism, to its own demise, has gotten this backward in many cases.

The New Testament indicates that the gospel will be viewed as foolish by secular society (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). It expressly warns believers not to partner in any spiritual enterprise with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). And it repeatedly admonishes the church to avoid worldliness (Ephesians 5:3-12; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17). Nonetheless, many evangelicals ignore these biblical truths in their quest to gain influence through academic, political, and culturally-relevant means.

In this chapter, we will briefly survey three arenas—the academic, the political, and the cultural—in which contemporary evangelicalism has, at times, prioritized influence over faithfulness.

The Quest for Academic Prestige

New Evangelicalism began in the 1940s, when a younger generation

of fundamentalists distanced themselves from fundamentalism because they felt it was too critical, isolationistic, and anti-intellectual. They remained committed to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, but wanted to present them in a more gracious and academically credible way. So in April 1942, a group of 147 leaders met in St. Louis to found a new organization called the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action. A year later, the name was shortened to the National Association of Evangelicals. The first president was Harold John Ockenga, a pastor from Boston who later cofounded both Fuller Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Historian George Marsden, commenting on the state of American fundamentalism when Fuller Seminary was founded, writes,

By 1947 fundamentalism seemed a cultural and intellectual wasteland...Fundamentalist leaders, despite far larger constituencies than America's secular self-image would admit to, felt keenly their lack of respect at the centers of culture. Academia was especially tightly closed. Only rarely did a bona fide conservative Bible believer gain a significant university position...Universities were crucial to the future of the nation, and fundamentalist evangelicals could point to no nationally recognized scholar who spoke clearly for their cause.⁴

The founding of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947 was intended to be a response to all of this. Charles Fuller himself exclaimed that it would be the “Caltech of the evangelical world.”⁵ But the desire for scholastic respectability came at great cost, as the seminary eventually abandoned the doctrinal moorings of its founders to embrace more progressive positions. Core evangelical principles, like biblical inerrancy, were discarded for the sake of acceptance by the academy. As Godfrey explains:

The most tragic consequence of the myth of influence is that those who embrace it often end up being influenced by the world rather than being a good influence on the world. For example, Fuller Seminary in its efforts to be more influential

by moving beyond its own fundamentalist roots has abandoned basic evangelical doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture.⁶

Marsden similarly observes:

At the School of Theology the new curriculum of the 1960s reflected the neo-evangelical intellectual agenda of being distinctly evangelical while at the same time producing scholarship so scientific that everyone would have to listen to it...A small incident from the mid-sixties was later reported by a number of alumni as encapsulating the academic ethos of that time. A student noticed that the seminary's sign could be much improved with a small scribal emendation. For several days it read, appropriately, FULLER THE LOGICAL SEMINARY.⁷

The seminary's original faculty held to biblical inerrancy. But that watershed doctrine was abandoned as the school began to prioritize human reason and academic influence above its historic commitment to Scripture. Iain Murray recounts Fuller's doctrinal decline with these words:

David A. Hubbard was made president [of Fuller] in 1963, despite the fact that he also needed to reinterpret the seminary's stated position on Scripture. Under Hubbard, Fuller Seminary moved into the mainstream of the American churches...But it was at the cost of Scripture. Hubbard came to represent his predecessors' beliefs on inerrancy as "the gas-balloon theory of theology. One leak and the whole Bible comes down." By 1982 it is said that only about 15 percent of the student body in the school of Theology held to the conviction of the seminary's founders on inerrancy. In Carl Henry's words, Fuller Seminary "moderated its initial biblical commitments and became infatuated with numbers."⁸

The doctrinal shift that took place at Fuller Seminary illustrates

what can happen when evangelicals exchange biblical principle for the seduction of secular scholarship and academic prestige. In the early 1970s, Martyn Lloyd-Jones warned against this very problem:

The true evangelical is not only distrustful of reason, but he is also distrustful of scholarship...The evangelical starts from the Scriptures. He also reads the history of the church, and there he finds that the history proves what has been emphasized in the Scripture, that when men trust to [human] reason and to understanding they go astray...The sum of all I am saying is that the evangelical distrusts scholarship and is watchful of it. That does not mean that he is anti-intellectual; it does not mean that he becomes obscurantist; but it does mean that he keeps reason and scholarship in their place. They are *servants* not masters.⁹

The myth of academic influence still tempts those who teach at evangelical universities and seminaries to weaken their commitment to Scripture. Mark Noll's book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* called evangelicals to leave behind the "intellectual disaster of fundamentalism"¹⁰ and get with the times. In particular, Noll challenged evangelical scholars to jettison what he considers to be the intellectual embarrassment of creation science.

The issue of creationism has been at the forefront of fundamentalist and evangelical debate ever since the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925—when a Tennessee high school teacher named John T. Scopes was prosecuted for teaching evolution in the classroom. The case received national attention, and was seen by many as a showdown between fundamentalism and modernism, between the Bible and science. Though the fundamentalists (represented by prosecutor William Jennings Bryan) won the trial, they lost in the court of public opinion. As a result, fundamentalism became an object of derision by the academic elite in American society.

Today, evangelicals are still being told that unless they relinquish young earth creationism and embrace forms of evolution, they will

never be taken seriously by the scientific community.¹¹ Many believe the only way to rescue Christianity from the ridicule of secular skeptics is to reinvent the Genesis account by turning days into ages or inserting gaps into the white spaces. Ironically, such attempts to rescue evangelicalism often end up attacking it. As Murray points out,

Evangelicals who step into situations where it is professionally unacceptable to teach the infallibility of Scripture come under immense pressure to show that the difference between them and their non-evangelical colleagues is not as great nor as serious as the Bible says it is. And where the desire to share the intellectual respectability associated with “modern scholarship” is strong, we should not be surprised if a less “rigid” view of Scripture soon comes to be espoused. In some cases, as we have seen, the process may well end with men criticizing the very evangelical Christianity which, it seemed, they once wished to see re-established.¹²

Much more could be said about these specific matters—but the point remains: When evangelicals prioritize *popular influence* over *biblical faithfulness*, they inevitably find themselves abandoning historic evangelical principles (like the inerrancy of Scripture) for the sake of academic respectability. Fuller Seminary is one such example of that downward trend. The current debate over origins is another.

To be clear, we would affirm that evangelicals ought to be diligent in their academic undertakings, aiming for excellence in their intellectual pursuits. At the same time, there will often come a point when the wisdom of God will be deemed foolish by the world. It is at that point where one must choose whether faithfulness will be prioritized over academic accolades. Whenever evangelicals have chosen academic respectability over doctrinal faithfulness, the results have been tragic.

The Quest for Political Power

Politics represents a second area in which modern evangelicalism has sometimes forfeited faithfulness for the sake of influence. For at

least the last five decades, American evangelicals have been fixated on politics. The landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973; the 1976 election of Jimmy Carter, a “born again” President; the founding of Focus on the Family by James Dobson in 1977; the establishment of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in 1979; the zenith of conservative politics during the Ronald Reagan administration in the 1980s; the forming of the Christian Coalition with Pat Robertson in 1989; the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and his re-election in 2004—factors like these have fueled the evangelical political machine over the years. Today, many in the church are still convinced that God is calling them to make a difference in the public square. As a result, they remain as enthusiastic about politics as ever.

Certainly, it is appropriate for evangelicals to be a prophetic voice in society. The Bible is clear that life begins at conception and therefore abortion is murder, that homosexuality is a sin, that capital punishment is a reasonable consequence for certain crimes, and that those who do not work should not eat. These biblical values will inevitably impact the way believers think about political issues. It is right for pastors to preach and teach those biblical values, and for the church to proclaim them in its role as the conscience of our nation. Christians are called to be salt and light, and at times that command may have political implications. Even so, the church must not allow its quest for political influence to override its commitment to gospel faithfulness.

Yet that is precisely what has happened. Evangelicals have partnered with Roman Catholics, Mormons, and other aberrant groups in order to gain political influence. In so doing, they have sacrificed the clarity and integrity of the eternal gospel on the altar of temporary political gain. When a common social or political agenda is prioritized over gospel faithfulness, the line between true and false forms of Christianity can easily get blurred. Consider the words of Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom in their book *Is the Reformation Over?*

America’s fundamental social concerns [like abortion and the economy] have contributed a great deal to the withering

of old interreligious antagonisms. Political debates on these issues, particularly controversy concerning how moral beliefs are to shape education, regularly reflect the passionate commitments of Americans from all points on the religious compass...In this new situation, Catholics and evangelicals often find themselves arguing the same or similar positions on public issues.¹³

According to Noll and Nystrom, common *socio-political* interests shared by Protestants and Catholics are undoing the *doctrinal* divisions that defined the Reformation. That shift is only possible because many modern evangelicals have placed greater weight on political influence than on doctrinal orthodoxy.

There is also the question of whether or not evangelicalism's involvement in politics has made any lasting difference. Perhaps it has slowed the tide of moral decay in America, but it has been unable to stop it. Any political gains that have been made along the way have only been short-lived. As Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, former insiders in the Religious Right, observe:

The impotence and near-irrelevance of the Religious Right were demonstrated on the day William Jefferson Clinton was inaugurated. Clinton's first two acts as president were to sign executive orders liberalizing rules against homosexuals in the military and repealing the few abortion restrictions applied under presidents Reagan and Bush. With a few pen strokes, Bill Clinton erased the little that the Moral Majority had been able to achieve during its brief existence. The tragedy was not the failure to succeed, but the waste of spiritual energy that would have been better spent on strategies and methods more likely to succeed than the quest for political power.¹⁴

More recently, the Supreme Court's landmark *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in June 2015, which legalized gay marriage across the nation, provides a prime example of how attempts to legislate morality in

America often fail. Viewed from an earthly perspective, that reality can be deeply disheartening. But believers should not be surprised nor become discouraged. Society will grow increasingly worse until the Lord Jesus Himself returns.

When we look to the New Testament, we see Christ commissioning the apostles not to go and make political changes in the world, but to make disciples through the preaching of the gospel. We see the apostle Paul, the great first-century missionary, telling his readers to submit to the government while trusting and obeying the Lord. Believers' hope for the future comes not from being able to vote, but from knowing that the Judge of all the earth is sovereign over the affairs of every government.

Sadly, evangelicalism's preoccupation with politics has resulted in an identity crisis of its own making. In the minds of many people, both inside and outside the movement, evangelicalism is no longer primarily associated with defending and declaring the truth of the gospel. Instead, it is more closely connected to socially conservative politics and attempts to legislate morality.¹⁵ While it is true that social issues are important, evangelicalism should not be defined chiefly by its political interests. Rather, it ought to be defined first and foremost by a faithful commitment to proclaim, protect, and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Quest for Cultural Relevance

Beyond the academy or the political action committee, the quest for influence has also left its mark on the American evangelical church. As congregations reach out to their communities, they rightly want to make an impact within their local sphere of influence for the sake of the gospel. But again problems arise when that desire for influence overrides the commitment to gospel faithfulness.

One of the most well-known examples in recent evangelical history is that of Billy Graham. Though he was brought up in fundamentalist circles, Graham adopted a ministry model for his evangelistic crusades that was decidedly antifundamentalist. Whereas fundamentalists made it a point to separate from apostate movements like liberal

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (based on passages like 2 Corinthians 6:14-18), Graham took the opposite tack. He welcomed nonevangelicals to participate in his crusades. As Godfrey explains,

The problem, however, was not just that Graham increasingly had liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics on his platform and committees, but that he sent inquirers back to those churches...As a matter of conviction, he wanted his work to serve the churches, but he also wanted to be an influence by having many churches involved and having large numbers attend the meetings. Cooperation with liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics was designed to increase the influence of the ministry with the aim of seeing more people converted.¹⁶

Graham's desire for greater evangelistic influence was noble, but it crossed the line of compromise when he began to partner with those who denied the true gospel. Speaking of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), Iain Murray writes:

The reason why the BGEA decided to co-operate with liberals and other non-evangelicals was never set out in terms of principle. The fact is that the policy was seen as a necessary expedient designed sincerely for the best end, namely to gain a wider hearing for the gospel. Crusades depended upon crowds and in the Graham story there is an almost ever-present concern for maintaining and increasing numbers.¹⁷

Greater influence, in terms of larger numbers of people, was so heavily prioritized that Graham's commitment to gospel purity began to erode.

This cooperative approach eventually led Graham to affirm Roman Catholics as fellow Christians,¹⁸ and to say things that sounded almost universalistic. In a 1997 interview with Robert Schuller, the aging evangelist made a startling statement. He said,

[God] is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world

or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved and they are going to be with us in heaven.¹⁹

Graham's gradual move from fundamentalism to a far-reaching ecumenism illustrates what can happen when the quest for influence supersedes a commitment to faithfulness. In seeking larger audiences, the lines of gospel exclusivity began to be erased.

Around the turn of the millennium, a similar trend was seen in the market-based methodologies of the seeker-driven church. Pastors started to think of themselves as CEOs, their churches as corporations, and their congregants as customers. Success was measured in terms of numbers, and church-growth gurus developed multistep programs that were virtually guaranteed to increase the size of any church. David Wells reflects on that market-driven approach to ministry:

Inspired by the corporate world, modeled after some of its successes like Disneyworld, and directed by Barna's polling numbers, the church set about selling itself and its gospel. What has happened is that the consumer model on which it was based reduced Christianity to just another product and its buyer to another sovereign consumer. In no time at all, Christianity was dancing to the tune of consumer desire, and the major casualty was biblical truth.²⁰

The market-driven church was followed by the emerging church movement, which pointed out the superficiality of its predecessor and called for authenticity, conversation, and cultural relevance. The emerging church did not last long on the evangelical scene. But it left in its wake a wave of enthusiasm for "contextualized" approaches to ministry. Mark Dever articulates the modern sentiment before offering an important warning:

The concern is what our outreach should be like; the buzzword is “contextualization.” Many writers and pastors seem to begin with the assumption that the gospel appears irrelevant to people today...As a result, we stress similarities [with unbelievers] in an attempt to help them feel at home, understood, and cared for when they are among us...[Many pastors think that] the more similar we appear to those we are trying to reach, the more the gospel will appear relevant to them, and therefore the more successful we’ll be at reaching them. We must beware here. A concern for evangelism, unmoored from the important revealed truth of Scripture, has often been the pathway to theological liberalism.²¹

Whether it leads to theological liberalism or moral libertinism, the reality is that contextualization can easily be abused. In some churches, it provides a convenient justification for imitating the world. Coarse jesting from the pulpit, sexually explicit sermons, the abuse of Christian liberty—these and similar antics are all excused in the name of building bridges to the lost. But that kind of ministry mindset is both spiritually dangerous and ultimately ineffective. To use sinful methods to reach sinners is self-defeating, and brings a reproach on the holy name of Christ. Yet such methods are often excused under the guise of trying to make the gospel relevant to those in modern culture.

A key passage in this regard is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where Paul explained that he was willing to make whatever sacrifices were needed to reach different types of people with the gospel. In verse 22, Paul said, “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.” Those words are sometimes used to defend an evangelistic approach that appeals to unbelievers using morally questionable methods. But that is actually the opposite of Paul’s point. He is not teaching that the end justifies the means, as though worldly methods (or an abuse of Christian liberties) should ever be used to create common ground with unbelievers. Rather, in the broader context, his point is that he *restricted* the use of his Christian liberties, if such

was necessary, to reach those whose consciences were more strict (and therefore weaker) than his own.

From both the context of this passage and his other epistles, it is clear that Paul would never sanction the use of carnal conduct, coarse humor, or crass speech to build bridges to the lost. Along with the other biblical authors, he consistently exhorted his hearers not to embrace the corruption of the culture, but rather to distance themselves from it. A survey of pertinent passages (like Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:5-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7; Ephesians 5:3-10; Titus 2:6-8, 11-12; James 1:27; 4:4; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 1 John 2:15-17) demonstrates that an emphasis on holiness in the midst of secular culture is not legalistic, it is biblical.

While it is true that believers minister within a cultural setting, there will inevitably be certain aspects of the culture they cannot embrace or celebrate. They are called to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. As children of light, Christians do not reach those trapped in darkness by shrouding their light and acting like darkness; rather, they reach the world by shining brighter and brighter in holiness (Matthew 5:14-16). The Bible is clear: The church has its greatest impact on the world not when it becomes like the world, but when it stands in counter-distinction to it.

Making It Personal

As we have seen, when evangelicals prize influence and popularity over faithfulness to the gospel, the results are spiritually destructive—whether in the academic arena, the political sphere, or the local church. But while it might be relatively easy to point fingers at the evangelical movement as a whole, it is much more difficult to examine our own hearts and motives. The sin of pride presents an ever present danger. So we must continually ask ourselves: Are there areas in our hearts, lives, or ministries in which we have been tempted to prioritize influence (in terms of respectability, relevance, or numeric results) over faithfulness to Christ and His Word?

Scripture defines true success as faithfulness to the Lord. The apostle Paul articulated that truth this way: “Therefore we also have

as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (2 Corinthians 5:9). Every believer’s primary duty is to love and obey our heavenly King (cf. Mark 12:30; John 14:15). Consequently, *faithfulness* to Him should always be the priority. If we remember that truth and live in light of it, we can look forward to that future day when we will hear our Lord say to us, “Well done, my good and *faithful* slave. Enter into the joy of your Master” (cf. Matthew 25:21).