

(Note: the following is an extract from *The Gagging of God*, by D.A. Carson. Please do not reproduce this handout outside of the purposes of this course.)

B. Selfism

In the pages that follow, I shall sometimes offer some rather negative judgments about the state of evangelicalism in the Western world. Precisely because so many books and articles have belabored such points in recent years, I need not repeat all the evidence here, but merely summarize some of the widely perceived trends, in order to establish a platform to say a few things that are less commonly observed.

But before launching into the negative, it is important to keep things in perspective by offering three observations. *First*, the progress of the evangel on a worldwide basis during the past one hundred years should be cause for great thanksgiving. More Muslims have come to Christ in Iran during the last fifteen years than in the previous one thousand years. Conservative estimates put the number of Christians in China at sixty million—a sixtyfold increase over the number of “Christians” of all stamps in China in 1950. At the turn of the century, Korea had no Protestant church, and was deemed by many experts to be impenetrable. Korea is over 30 percent Christian today, with something like seven thousand churches in Seoul alone. The nation with the highest number of Muslims in the world, Indonesia, has also witnessed the greatest number of Muslims converting to Jesus Christ. Africa has at least ten times as many Christians today as it did in 1900. This does not mean there are no problems in any of these areas. Some of the “conversions” are doubtless spurious. The level of Bible knowledge and Christian experience is sometimes disturbingly shallow, making the transition to the next generation an extremely perilous affair. Even so, it would be both unrealistic and ungrateful not to rejoice in what God has done.

Second, even within Western Anglo-Saxon countries there has been some cause for gratitude. In the wake of the various forms that the modernist/fundamentalist battles took at the beginning of the century and beyond, outside of Southern Baptist circles there were almost no leaders of evangelical conviction with bona fide advanced degrees. The degrees by themselves may mean little, but the loss was also a crude measurement of the loss in intellectual leadership in the movement, in the nation, in the training facilities for helping to form a new generation of pastors. Then Westminster Theological Seminary was founded, followed by Fuller and a substantial number of others, the best of which maintain standards at the M.Div. level second to none in the nation. The Tyndale Fellowship in England provided incalculable assistance to new generations of students from around the world who were seeking advanced training in biblical studies. The level and quality of evangelical publications today far exceeds what existed half a century ago. (In every case, of course, there are disappointments. Some of the newly founded seminaries have already drifted from their moorings. Some of the rising generation of Christian scholars have become more interested in academic acceptability than in the progress of the gospel. Publishing houses crank out a discouraging quantity of piffle along with substantial work. But the fact remains that by God’s grace there have been gains.) One of the reasons we have been slow to perceive the positive gains is that the extraordinary rate of decline in the culture as a whole has left us with a perception of a *net* loss that influences our assessment of evangelicalism itself.

Third, one cannot thoughtfully read the Bible without perceiving that in this fallen world there will always be struggle, and the shape of the opposition will vary constantly, whatever the

commonalities. The danger for Christians who are fixated on the present and are too little aware of either history or what the Bible says is that they become depressed or exhilarated by relatively superficial assessments of the current state of affairs. During the “Year of the Evangelical” (1976), any number of evangelical leaders made the most outrageous comments about how the movement was poised to take over, clean house, bring in renewal and reform, decrease crime and corruption, and so on and so on. Quite apart from the sheer stupidity of such pronouncements—I cannot think of a faster way to provide incentives to the millions of Americans who loathe or are utterly indifferent to the agendas of vociferous evangelicals to organize effective opposition—the statements were born out of raw power, not humility; out of “can do” aggression, not a sense of dependency on the Spirit of God; out of ignorance of how fast popularity (and unpopularity) can shift; out of sublime indifference to the dangers of corruption in our own hearts, let alone the hearts of others, with the result that strategy is reduced to the political arena alone; out of rosy-eyed misreading of America’s past. Conversely, now that the media seem to dump on evangelicals above all others, we forget how often the church has been in declension before. While regretting and trying to change some current trends, and while repenting of our own sins (which are many), it is vital that we maintain a certain sense of historical proportion, refusing to follow the siren voices that call us to despair or rage.

Despite such preliminary attempts to maintain a sense of perspective, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that profound *selfism*—self-centeredness elevated to an unrecognized principle of interpretation—governs not only much of Western culture, but, of more interest to us at the moment, much of the Western church. This is one of the major themes in a string of recent evangelical critiques of the Western church, especially in America. They agree that the church is too pragmatic, hedonistic, relativistic, given to emotion rather than thought, and, in short, self-centered. As Lints finely writes:

This fascination with the self gives rise to the new focus of theodicy for modern evangelicals—unhappiness. How can there be a God if we are not happy all the time? Evil has become a private emotion, and the new gospel is that God offers to heal us of that privatized evil. The church exists to make people feel comfortable and happy. This is simply hedonism baptized with Christian rhetoric. We have come a great distance from Edwards’s vision of theology as reflecting the glory of God, a glory that is also the chief end of humankind.

The evidence is everywhere.

In a former age, insatiable desire was understood to be a principal source of frustration, something to be opposed. Now it is to be cultivated as the engine that drives economic development. The endemic consumerism of the age feeds our greed, and even defines our humanity: we are not primarily worshipers, or thinkers, or God’s image-bearers, or lovers, but *consumers*. “Consumerism itself has become a kind of addiction. The more toys we acquire the more frequent and expensive they need to be to produce the old high. The shift from finding identity in what we produce to what we possess, from a work ethic to a consumption ethic, at once exalts the pursuit of happiness and guarantees its ultimate futility.”

When Postman wrote the introduction to his important book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he set forth the stance he adopts by contrasting the warnings of George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*:

Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their

capacities to think.... What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared that we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. In *1984*, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.

Even if we make allowances for the exaggerations in their created “worlds,” there is little doubt that at the moment, Huxley’s vision is closer to fulfillment in the West than Orwell’s.

Four decades ago de Jouvenel compared and contrasted the claims of capitalism and socialism and concluded that we are invited to choose between them on the basis of which is better able to increase our level of consumption. “Nothing quite so trivial has been made into a social ideal.” As Schlossberg observes,

materialism is thought to signify the desire for consumer goods, the meaning that led Huxley to refer to the Sears Roebuck catalog as the “Newest Testament.” The legitimacy of such desires may be judged in part by our ability to satisfy them. All true needs—such as food, drink, and companionship—are satiable. Illegitimate wants—pride, envy, greed—are insatiable. By their nature they cannot be satisfied. In that sense materialism is the opium of the people. Enough is never enough. Greater quantities are required for satisfaction, and each increment proves inadequate the next time. That is the horror of the giant in John Bunyan and the wicked witch in C. S. Lewis who give their victims food that causes greater hunger. The idolatries that promise wealth without end draw adherents as the tavern draws alcoholics.... That is the sense in which the love of money is the root of all evils (1 Tim. 6:10).

This does not mean that no economic system can ever be said to be better than another. It means, rather, that when a system is judged purely on the basis of its ability to feed consumerism, no thoughtful Christian can ever responsibly espouse the criterion as a Christian value. That means that today, when government programs in Britain and the United States are being cut back, even if one espouses the desirability of such steps on the grounds of efficiency, fiscal responsibility, or sheer financial necessity, it is troubling that most of the criteria being appealed to in the debate are the products of a fundamentally materialistic outlook.

This development in the broader culture is all too easily mirrored in the church. Initially one thinks of the “prosperity gospel” of the so-called “faith” movement (“name it and claim it”), connected with Benny Hinn, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch and others. But their views, as popular as they are in certain strands of televangelist land, are so bizarre that no one with a scrap of theological smarts should consider them evangelicals in any useful sense of the term. Harder to identify is the kind of evangelical who formally espouses the historic faith but whose heartbeat is for more and more of this world’s goods, whose dreams are not for heaven and for the glory of God, but for success, financial independence, a bigger house, a finer car.

More alarming still is the consumer mentality in the heart of mainstream evangelicalism. If left unchecked it will evacuate the heritage. One worries, for instance, about strategies that are nothing but marketing techniques.³⁹ Doubtless one could argue that this is merely a matter of

terminology, that all of us need to be aware of the profiles of the people around us whom we wish to evangelize. After all, don't I myself argue along similar lines (chaps. 12 and 14 of this book)?

But the differences are important. For a start, *words* are important. As soon as you start referring to outreach as a “marketing strategy” you not only change the perception of what you are about, but the rules that operate. There may be *some* legitimate overlap, and the church marketers will bleed them to death. But there are also enormous differences, and the imposition of consumer categories obscures them. In any case, there is a fundamental difference between trying to learn from Acts 17 how to be culture-sensitive as we go about declaring the good news of Jesus Christ to people who are perishing without him, and thinking of the church as a corporation that must market its product to potential consumers. Crossing the cultural barriers to communicate the gospel “that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) is one thing. But as we have seen, if we control our evangelism by analysis of market “needs” the result is virtually always a domesticated gospel.

Today [unlike the time of Augustine] the church also announces that “the good life” is found in Christ, but we have so completely reinterpreted the meaning of that classical phrase that for many people, the good life means little more than personal peace and prosperity. As a result, we have readjusted the gospel message so that it offers health and wealth rather than power over greed and pride.

Perhaps the most damning evidence comes in the little things. When church music directors never fail to tell their choirs to “go backstage” to get ready, it is not hard to discern the tentacles of the entertainment industry controlling our vocabulary and our thoughts. When serious Christian journals publish articles with titles like “Will There Be Baseball in Heaven?” one can be quite certain that the author has not thought very deeply on Revelation 4–5, 21–22. When churches advertise themselves in the newspaper with lines like, “We feature entertaining worship”—an exact quote, I am afraid—one scarcely knows whether to laugh or weep. When a recent graduate of the seminary in which I teach writes and tells me of his struggles in an evangelical church to help people to see that in small-group Bible study the *primary* aim is not to ensure that everyone ventures an opinion that can never be gainsaid, but that the *primary* aim is to discover what Scripture says and to work out how to apply it to life, one smells more than a whiff of postmodernist decay. When ministerial students are asked about their sense of call to ministry, and the best they can muster is, “I think I would feel fulfilled doing that kind of work,” selfism has struck again.

Small groups in a church can do a great deal of good. They can foster genuine fellowship, serve as centers for exhortation and intercessory prayer, deepen knowledge of the Bible, model Christian graces from older Christians to younger ones, inculcate principles of inductive Bible study. Wuthnow shows how small groups can develop a sense of taking responsibility for one's faith, and can strengthen the desire to support others.

But because they are of value in these ways, [small groups] can also inadvertently emphasize some aspects of spirituality at the expense of others. Individual responsibility may result in faith being focused too much on the needs and interests of the individual. When this happens, it may also encourage each individual to do his or her “own thing” to the extent that faith becomes highly relativistic. Informal norms of support and encouragement may also work against the hard efforts actually required to develop one's spiritual muscles. Small groups, therefore, reinforce the emphasis in American religion on taking responsibility for one's faith, but may alter (or even undermine) this emphasis at the same time.

The truth of the matter is that the consumer mentality authorizes people to judge all matters religious and theological by the simple criterion of whether or not they have been “helped”—and the only people equipped to assess whether or not they have truly been helped are the people who claim to have been helped. Questions of truth, long-range effects, and purpose are all shunted aside.

The pursuit of a feeling of being “helped” is bound up with the current passion for “self-esteem.” The importance of self-esteem in order to achieve anything and gain wholeness has so been drummed into us that even Christians who should know better have bought into it.

The bottom line is that no agreed-upon definition or agreed-upon measure of self-esteem exists, and whatever it is, no reliable evidence supports self-esteem scores meaning much at all anyway. There is no evidence that high self-esteem reliably causes anything—indeed lots of people with little of it have achieved a great deal in one dimension or another.... I am not implying that high self-esteem is always negatively related to accomplishment. Rather, the research mentioned above shows that measures of self-esteem have no reliable relationship to behavior, either positive or negative.

Vitz’s point is not that there is no place for thinking Christianly about “self-worth.” Indeed, Christians will ponder the fact that they are God’s image-bearers, that they are loved by their Maker in the most self-sacrificial way possible, and much more. But the therapeutic culture, designed to make people feel helped, has taken over.

A few months ago I was in another country addressing some hundreds of missionaries. As I was at lunch with one missionary couple, the question of “rebirthing” came up. Somewhat defensively at first, and then openly, the husband told me his story. He came from an abusive background; the notion of “father” was entirely distorted for him. As a college student he trusted Christ, but never really felt or delighted in the love of God or the love of Christ. Then, some months before I arrived, an “evangelical” professor gave some talks on rebirthing which this missionary attended. He said that people from abusive homes should close their eyes and imagine themselves as they were emerging from their mothers. Picture Jesus standing there, ready to catch you up into his arms. You emerge, and he cuddles you, cleans you up, loves you, caresses you. Do you not see how all your life Jesus has been loving? The missionary told me that he broke down and wept and wept, and from that moment his life had become more integrated. He had become better able to give and receive love; for the first time he felt loved by Jesus. What was wrong with that, he wanted to know. The Bible does not teach rebirthing, but it does affirm the love of God, and if this technique helps you experience it, what fair criticism can be offered?

So many things could have been said. I had no desire to “crush a bruised reed” or “quench a smoking wick.” I replied along these lines:

“I cannot help but be glad if your life is truly more integrated. I have talked with enough people from abusive backgrounds to have some idea of the terrible struggles you have gone through, and doubtless will go through. If in truth this experience really does teach you more of the love of God, I shall not be the first to criticize.

“But I have to tell you that at best you have experienced second best; and at worst you have been seduced to idolatry. Bear with me, and I shall try to explain.

“My dear brother, all the emotional catharsis, all the tears, all the healing integration, might well have been yours *along biblical lines*. You might have meditated long on Ephesians 3:14–21, praying along with Paul that God would give you the power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God, to know this love that surpasses

knowledge. You might have read and re-read the passion narratives. Where, after all, according to God's gracious self-disclosure in Scripture, is the greatest manifestation of his love? Is it not in the incarnation and the cross? Might not a godly pastor taking you back to the cross have brought you to the same tears, but with the anchor of God's Word authorizing them?

"For the fact of the matter is that you now associate your emotional release not with the cross, but with rebirthing techniques. You will be less inclined to think of the gospel as that which is the power of God unto salvation. You will think of the gospel as providing some sort of pardon, and rebirthing techniques as providing healing, power, restoration. All the associational links are wrong. They are diverting. They bring you some measure of relief, while distracting you from the cross.

"And if you ask, 'Why be so fussy as long as I am genuinely healed, or at least substantially improved?' then you have brought yourself to the very heart of my argument: the primary criterion for what is right and true and valuable cannot possibly be whether or not you feel helped. This does not mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified *can't* help you: it can, and does, and will. It means that the content of that gospel cannot be determined or approved simply on the basis of whether or not you *feel* helped. For if that were the case, would not the archenemy, whose love of deception is well known, have a field day 'helping' people, and helping people feel helped, provided the result is that they are diverted from the cross? If he is clever—and he is—the danger will not be perceived at once. Like a spacecraft swiftly speeding off course by only a degree or two, this kind of trajectory ensures that in time you will miss the mark by millions of miles.

"And that is why I insist that at best you have experienced second best; at worst, you are being seduced into idolatry."

In short, the selfism that is characteristic of Western culture dominates more than a little of the church's life and thought and values and priorities as well. As always, there are wonderful, humbling exceptions. But the direction is not encouraging. Clowney's conclusions are not too strong:

The world cannot be sacralized by the fiat of the new theology to form the community of love Christ came to establish. The world lacks the new life of the Spirit who sheds abroad the love of Christ in human hearts. It cannot be governed by the spiritual structure of Christ's kingdom. It is the church that possesses the Spirit, and indeed is possessed by the Spirit to manifest on earth now the realities of heaven and the age to come. The politics of the kingdom demand that Christians take seriously the structure of the church as the form of the people of God on earth. Today the church stands not so much as an institution as a ruin. Preachers of another gospel are not only tolerated; they control the church. The church is in Babylonian captivity to secular goals and values. While radical theologians serve the political left, there is no lack of conservative preachers to proclaim a fascist nationalism in the name of Christ. No longer does the church's ministry of mercy bear witness to the compassion of Christ's gospel. Instead, Christians spend on extravagant luxuries the funds Christ has entrusted to them for the relief of the poor and needy.

The deep fellowship of love that joins the Lord's people finds little expression in churches that meet for one brief hour of formal boredom every Sunday morning. Evangelism has been shifted by default to para-ecclesiastical organizations, many presenting a truncated gospel, and most by their very specialization detaching the gospel from the life of a serving and loving community.¹

¹ Carson, D. A. (2011). *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Fifteenth Edition) (461–470). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.