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A REVIEW ARTICLE

A PROPHET FOR OUR TIMES: THE JEREMIADS OF DAVID F. WELLS

Gary L. W. Johnson

At the beginning of the decade the name David F. Wells was vaguely familiar to me. I knew he taught theology at Gordon-Conwell and that he had edited a very good book on Reformed theology in America¹, but beyond that I knew little else. Then came the "Evangelical Megashift" article that appeared in the February 19, 1990, issue of *Christianity Today*. Wells' analysis of the "new-model" evangelicals grabbed my attention. His response to the evangelical megashift, titled "Assaulted by Modernity," as I was later to discover, served as an appropriate introduction for his later writings. In 1993, his *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* fell like a bomb on the playground of evangelicalism. In more ways than one this book made a profound and lasting impression on me. I had become increasingly aware that, as Bob Dylan once said, "the times they are a changing," and found myself ill at ease with much that was happening in the evangelical world. Wells was to me at this time what Interpreter was to Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1994 Wells produced his equally impressive *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. This book picks up where *No Place for Truth* left off. Most recently he has written the third volume in the series, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*

(1998). Although these three books have met with critical acclaim (*Time* magazine, which rarely takes note of anything seriously theological, did so, calling it "a stinging indictment of evangelicalism's theological corruption"), they have at the same time raised the ire of many who walk under the expansive evangelical banner. *Christianity Today*, the leading mouthpiece for the evangelical parade, gave a brief and not very flattering review of *No Place for Truth*.² *Christianity Today* has completely ignored *God in the Wasteland* and, to date, has done the same with *Losing Our Virtue*.³ Why the cold shoulder? What has Wells written that would offend the good folks at *Christianity Today*? In addition to his devastating critique of much of popular evangelicalism, Wells, like Nathan the prophet, points an accusing prophetic finger at *Christianity Today* as being one of the leading culprits in evangelicalism's sad decline.⁴ Wells contends that over the last two decades evangelicalism has undergone some significant and drastic changes, changes that are painfully obvious in the pages of *Christianity Today*. The changes have taken place on two levels. One level is decidedly theological and reflects the megashift alluded to earlier. Wells is well aware of the changes occurring along these lines, but sees the problem as stemming from the changes taking place at an altogether different level. These changes are social and cultural and are, for that reason, not as quickly discerned. This makes them insidious to the point of being demonic. While evangelicals were busy perfecting techniques for church growth, building a coalition for political clout, and rapidly adopting the mindset and vocabulary of our therapeutic culture, the enemy of their soul was equally busy sowing seeds of theological indifference and accommodation that would eventually render the good ship *Evangelical* rudderless.

The multivolume project (*Losing Our Virtue* being the third of a possible seven-volume set) that Wells has

undertaken actually constitutes a systematic theology written from a decidedly cultural perspective. This is not to say that Wells is working outside the framework of traditional, Reformation orthodoxy. Wells actually represents evangelicalism at its best. He is, however, not content to simply retrace the steps of previous evangelical systematians. What he is engaged in (from the perspective of one committed to the historic Christian faith) is a careful, rigorous and sustained analysis of Western culture. Evangelicalism, bemoans Wells, has failed to recognize the powerful undercurrents of modernity that course through our society. Evangelicals at times seem blissfully unaware of such dangers and as a result become captives to the spirit of the age. Like a person who fails to notice that carbon monoxide is seeping into the car, so increasing numbers of evangelicals look at the culture they inhabit as being either harmless or neutral. This has wrought havoc in our churches. This mentality produces, among other things, an inability to be self-critical about those very areas that pose the greatest danger to the evangelical faith.

Evangelicals who are the most sensitive (and highly indignant to the kind of criticism put forth by Wells) usually respond by rehearsing their allegiance to the historic Christian faith as if this guarantees fidelity. But it does not work that way. We may, as card-carrying evangelicals, confess evangelical affirmations which we may sincerely hold without realizing that our confession is not holding on to us!⁵ Wells laments the present state of affairs, assaying that the enculturation of the evangelical world has resulted in a theologically emptied-out faith. Modernity has successfully crept into every nook and cranny of our evangelical being. We are captives who refuse to acknowledge our chains and who deeply resent being told that the chains are actually there for all to see.

Wells has discovered all too well that the mantle of a prophet weighs heavily on the one who must deliver an unpopular message.⁶

Space will not permit an extended analysis of Wells' arguments but part of his work deals with how our theological terms have been eviscerated. We have retained the language, but the meaning has been noticeably affected by our therapeutic culture. In our therapeutic culture the individual becomes the focus of our daily concerns. We become preoccupied with wholeness rather than holiness. Happiness replaces righteousness, and feeling good about ourselves is the gauge by which we measure ourselves. Perhaps in no more important area is this manifested than when speaking about sin. Traditionally sin has always been understood theologically. Not anymore. Instead of seeing sin as it pertains to God the Lawgiver, in typical therapeutic form we increasingly psychologize sin as something that makes us feel bad about ourselves. It should not go unnoticed, Wells argues, to see how the various doctrines of Scripture are interrelated. If one is altered or changed, it will have a tell-tale effect on other doctrines. If sin is redefined, the doctrine of God will likewise be modified because the biblical concept of holiness cannot be maintained if sin is something other than sin. Wells draws a fascinating analogy between the spirituality of our evangelical forebears like Martin Luther, John Owen, and David Brainerd, and the kind of spirituality that pervades contemporary evangelicalism. The world they inhabited becomes enigmatic to those who live and breathe in a therapeutic culture. Their doctrinal understanding of the biblical themes of sin and the holiness of God, for example, strike many present-day evangelicals' ears like a foreign language does the ears of a tourist traveling in another country. Communication

becomes the major obstacle to getting around.

Not only is the doctrine of God turned topsy-turvy, but the doctrine of Christ is seriously altered. This should not come as a big surprise. After all, if sin is not something subject to the judgment of a holy God, then the cross-work of Christ becomes something other than a propitiatory sacrifice. Wells, along with the Protestant Reformers, rightly contends that the Christian faith will always be misunderstood if the cross is misunderstood. It is not uncommon today to hear evangelicals speak of the cross of Christ in a very nebulous fashion. Somehow, somehow, Jesus did something at Calvary that means we don't have to worry about our sins. The whole panorama of redemption is reduced to trying to get people to ask Jesus into their hearts so that they can experience the abundant life. Saving faith in this scheme is seen primarily as something that brings inward joy, happiness and a problem-free life. People are told to receive Christ in order to have all their personal concerns remedied. Allan Bloom complained that his generation of educated M.D.s and Ph.D.s lacked any comparable learning. When confronting the serious issues of life, they responded with clichés, superficialities and the material of satire.⁷ Sadly the same thing can be said of much that passes for evangelicalism. Our theologically emptied-out faith is exposed once we start trying to speak about eternal realities. Like those taken into the Babylonian captivity, we forget our covenantal language and can only babble the verbiage of our captors.

Wells has done a great service for the evangelical church. But like Jeremiah of old, his efforts to confront the people of God with their idolatry have not been well received across the evangelical landscape. Despite his confrontation and direct style, Wells is not mean-spirited, nor is he simply a disgruntled Calvinist who looks

nostalgically back to the days of Edwards and Owen. Like Jeremiah his pointed message is the passionate plea of a prophet. He deserves to be heard.

Author

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Notes

1. *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
2. Roger Olson, who teaches at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, and frequently reviews books for *Christianity Today*, said in his disinterested assessment of *No Place for Truth*, "I suspect what Wells wants is not just a return to theology but a restoration of an old-style Puritan, Calvinist theology among evangelicals" (*Christianity Today*, July 19, 1993), 58. Olson is representative of the new breed neo-Arminianism. This type of Arminian theology is distantly removed from that advocated by John Wesley. Olson's Arminianism is actually a product of modernity and it is, therefore, not surprising then to find Olson very unsympathetic to Wells' concerns.
3. *Christianity Today* has also neglected D. A. Carson's massive *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) and *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John Armstrong (Chicago: Moody, 1996) despite the fact that these books (especially *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*) were well received and sold in very respectable numbers. These volumes share Wells' critical perspective on certain trends that are afoot in evangelical circles, and I suspect that *Christianity Today* purposely avoided them for that reason.
4. More recently Wells penned an editorial for *Modern Reformation* (6:5, September/October 1997) titled "Killing Us Softly" (p. 40) where he unloaded both barrels on *Christianity Today*. There was a time, he says, when *CT* made a serious contribution to the evangelical church. But times have changed and *CT* has as well, but not for the better. The changes, Wells charges, have been made not out of theological conviction but due to expediency and for fiscal considerations. The outcry from the wounded in Carol Stream has not stopped; see the Letters section in *Modern Reformation* (7:1, January/February 1998, and 7:2, March/April 1998).
5. Robert Brow, in the lead article endorsing the "Evangelical Megashift," subtitled "Why you may not have heard about wrath, sin, and hell recently," made this alarming assertion: "Many readers of *Christianity Today* will recognize that they have moved in some of these directions without being conscious of a mode shift. And the old model can be modified and given qualifications for a time. But once three or four of the changes have occurred, our thinking is already organized around the new model. We may still use old-model language and assume we believe as before, but our hearts are changing our minds" (*Christianity Today*, February 19, 1990), 14.
6. Millard J. Erickson is representative of those who think Wells paints with too broad a brush. Although Erickson commends Wells' thesis at points, his overall assessment is primarily negative, concluding that Wells lacks empathy for evangelicals who struggle with the reality of living in a world that has been forever changed by the forces of modernity; see his *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 23-41.
7. A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 60.