

THE CHURCH MILITANT AND HER WARFARE: WE ARE NOT ANOTHER INTEREST GROUP

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Introduction

Near the end of *No Place for Truth*, David Wells describes a striking anomaly:

The vast growth in evangelically minded people in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s should by now have revolutionized American culture. With a third of American adults now claiming to have experienced spiritual rebirth, a powerful countercurrent of morality growing out of a powerful and alternative worldview should have been unleashed in factories, offices, and board rooms, in the media, universities, and professions, from one end of the country to the other. The results should by now be unmistakable. Secular values should be reeling, and those who are their proponents should be very troubled. But as it turns out, all of this swelling of the evangelical ranks has passed unnoticed in the culture.¹

I will contend in this presentation that part of the remedy to this problem is to be found in a shift in focus. The need for this shift in focus is attested to by a comment Amy Black makes in a review of David Kuo's *Tempting Faith*. Black writes,

[Kuo's] call for a "fast" from politics (except for voting) has caused a bit of a stir, but perhaps that partially proves his point even if he presses too far toward an either-or dilemma. If we can't fathom taking even a short break from political activity, perhaps we have too much faith in politics. Despite and even through its shortcomings, perchance Kuo's book and the controversy it stirs will help turn Christians away from the temptation to place their primary confidence in politics as God's path to cultural restoration.²

My contention is that in seeking a *Christian America* we have hazarded our identity as *Christian churches*. David Wells has shown that success and influence have

¹ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 293.

² Amy E. Black, "Faith in Politics: What can we learn from David Kuo's memoir of a Christian in the corridors of power?" *Books and Culture*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/books/features/bookwk/061030.html>, accessed November 4, 2006.

accomplished what liberalism failed to do to evangelical Christianity.³ The distinctive doctrines of Christianity and the hard edges of the faith are now hard to find in many evangelical churches, having been replaced by the guarantors of influence and success: self-help, moralism, psychology, therapy, and programs, programs, programs. Most sermons are more like pep-talks from motivational speakers than they are proclamations of the living word of God. We evangelicals are waging war according to the flesh (cf. 2 Cor 10:3).

We must shift our focus away from worldly measures of influence and success and return to what makes us Christian. This brief essay comes in three parts. First, a look at the problem. From there we will consider two related antidotes to the problem: a clear understanding of regeneration and a commitment to church discipline. We must re-arm ourselves with weapons of warfare that are mighty through God (2 Cor 10:4).

If we are Christians, we believe that influence in America does not come from gaining the ear of the White House but through the transforming power of the one who will sit on the White Throne. The legislation of our worldview must not be our ultimate goal. We need a demonstration of the Spirit and power, we need to return to God's wisdom, which is the world's folly, God's power, which the world counts as weakness, and we look for the Lord to grant that the faith of astonishing numbers of people will not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God. We need a great awakening. Our field of labor is neither the public policies being debated on the Senate floor nor the legal matters before the Supreme Court. Our field of labor is the place we have been assigned to plough, sow, and reap with a local body of believers with whom we have entered into solemn covenant before the Lord of heaven and earth.

³ Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*

The Problem

Many people in America believe in something, but much of our spirituality has little connection to the contours of the historic Christian faith. Barna claims that 36% of the population in the United States of America is born again, and he claims that only 10% of the population is atheistic or agnostic, which means that 90% of the population claims to believe in God.⁴ But only 9% of the population can be called “evangelical,” and between 1991 and 2004 there was a 92% increase in the number of unchurched Americans.⁵

Many people in America believe in something, but all this believing is an anemic, unspecific kind of “faith” that amounts to a vague interest in spiritual things but has little influence on the way people live. William J. Bennett claims that between 1960 and 1993 “violent crime has increased 560%, the number of single-parent households has increased 300%, the number of births to unmarried women has increased 400% (68% of black children now fall in this category), and teenage suicide has increased 200%.”⁶

Many people in America believe in something, but that does not mean churches are healthy. Every week in America 50–75 churches close their doors.⁷ It is often claimed that 3,000 churches in America close every year.⁸

⁴ The Barna Group, “Beliefs: General Religious,” accessed 4 September 2006, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=2>.

⁵ The Barna Group, “Barna Update for May 4, 2004,” accessed 4 September 2006, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=163>.

⁶ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 155.

⁷ The Barna Group, statistic cited in description of “How to Turn Around Your Church” video, accessed 4 September 2006, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Resource&resourceID=15>.

⁸ Rebecca Barnes and Linda Lowry, “Special Report: The American Church in Crisis,” from *Outreach* magazine, May/June 2006, accessed 4 September 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/outreach/articles/americanchurchcrisis.html>.

Why do we see such massive decline in church health and in societal morality when all these people claim to believe in God? Why do so many churches close, and why isn't the society more widely affected by the fact that one third of its population claims to be born again? The answer to these questions is as complex as God's hidden providence, but David Wells argues that one factor in the situation is clear: the church has become so worldly that it has lost its power.⁹

We have drifted from what Mark Noll has referred to as a "defining principle of Protestant evangelicalism," namely, an "unswerving belief in the need for conversion (the new birth) and the necessity of a life of active holiness (the power of godliness)."¹⁰ Does this vast bloc of people that claims to be born again know what the new birth is? If not, who failed to tell them? Do they know the privileges and responsibilities of church membership? If not, who failed to tell them? Noll refers to conversion and godliness as the "defining principle of Protestant evangelicalism." Without the new birth, conversion has not taken place, and the practice of church discipline is the pursuit of godliness in the church.

Some seek to address the problems in our society by leaving the church and seeking to engage the culture on key social issues such as abortion, evolution, and gay marriage.¹¹ God calls people to many vocations, but the church is the manifestation of his kingdom in our day. As Russell D. Moore writes, "If the Kingdom is to be understood as having a present reality, and that reality is essentially soteriological, then the Kingdom agenda of evangelical theology must focus on the biblical fulcrum of these

⁹ Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*

¹⁰ Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*, A History of Evangelicalism (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 15.

¹¹ Michael Foust, "Fox Resigns from Kan. Church with Goal of Engaging Culture," Baptist Press, August 7, 2006, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23748>.

eschatological, salvific blessings: the church.”¹² The church is God’s appointed means of transforming human society at this point in salvation history. The great commission does not send us out to legislate morality but to make disciples. In order to understand what it means to be the church, we must be clear on how people become part of the church, and we must devote ourselves to preserving the purity of the church. In other words, we must understand the nature of the new birth, and we must practice church discipline.

What seems to have happened in Baptist churches in the southern United States after the American Civil War sheds light on both the failure to understand the new birth and the decline in church discipline. Greg Wills has shown that as church discipline declined attempts to improve the morality of the wider culture rose.¹³ Churches moved away from seeking to preserve a clear line between the church and the world by maintaining regenerate church membership through rigorous church discipline. Instead of maintaining their own purity, churches and pastors sought to purify the culture. Instead of Christian *churches*, ministers set their sights on a Christian *civilization*. Along these lines, Ted Ownby writes that “As churches were losing interest in disciplining the behavior of their members, they were trying to reform the behavior of all Southerners.”¹⁴ This altered goal reveals that the pure church was no longer seen as God’s tool for reforming people. Emphasis on the purity of the church naturally declined, and the new goals needed new methods. In the process concern for the new birth and church discipline were eclipsed by the most significant sign of success in North American evangelicalism: the big crowd. If the goal is influencing society and numbers of people are the gauge of success,

¹² Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 129.

¹³ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785–1900* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 133.

¹⁴ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 207, cited in Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 182 n. 67.

emphasizing the miracle of regeneration and the practice of church discipline hinders more than it helps. Once the church lost its own purity, it began to look more and more like the world it sought to transform.

It is not that pre-Civil War generations were not interested in changing society; it is that they saw changed society as resulting from pure churches. Previous generations had sought the purity of the church first, believing that this was the best path to revival.¹⁵ Since the Civil War, civil religion's focus on purifying society rather than maintaining the purity of the church has made the very concept of a "pure church" foreign. Now, the broader society is no longer civil to religion, and the practice of church discipline is not on the radar of most churches. As a result, the church's morality has been conformed to the spirit of the age. Many evangelical churches are now in danger of being so palatable to unbelieving Americans that the Lord Christ might find them banal and insipid and spew them right out of his mouth (Rev 3:16).

The history of the evangelical revival in the days of George Whitefield would indicate that if the church wants to influence culture, it should make plain what it means to be born again. Having described the dissolute condition of English culture just prior to the first Great Awakening, Arnold Dallimore quotes a description of the affects of the revival on society at large:

. . . a religious revival burst forth . . . which changed in a few years the whole temper of English society. The Church was restored to life and activity. Religion carried into the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 27, 33, 35

¹⁶ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, vol. 1 (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1970), 32.

Whitefield “summarized his early ministry and its effect, saying, ‘The doctrine of the New Birth and Justification by Faith (though I was not so clear in it as afterwards) made its way like lightning into the hearers’ consciences.’”¹⁷ We turn to a consideration of one thing needful in the pursuit of the remedy to the church’s illnesses: a clear understanding of the new birth.

The New Birth¹⁸

I am contending that the mission of the church is not to function as a political action committee but to proclaim the Gospel and pray for God to regenerate people. We should follow the apostles and “devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). These are not weapons the world will see as effective, but they are mighty through God (cf. 2 Cor 10:3–4). The great commission is to make disciples (Matt 28:19). Disciples cannot be legislated, and better laws do not bring about regeneration. It is important for us to understand what the New Testament tells us about regeneration.

John introduces the theme of the new birth in the prologue to the Gospel, stating that those who received Jesus did so because they “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). These people were born of God “not of blood.” This points away from ancestry and parentage. The children of God were born of God not “of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man.” The double statement that those who receive Jesus are not born by human desire indicates that the new birth comes from God rather than from what people want or choose. John 1:13 clearly indicates that being born of God does not originate “from the will of man.”

¹⁷ Dallimore, *Whitefield*, 128.

¹⁸ For further discussion of the new birth, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, NACSBT (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 58–59, 127–143.

John tells us more about the new birth in John 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again (3:3, 5). The statements in John 3:3 and 3:5 overlap, but the slight difference between them describes two different things. In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This literally reads, “he is not able to see the kingdom of God.” This is a statement about human ability. Apart from the new birth, humans are not able to experience the reality of the kingdom. Following the statement that humans are not able to perceive the kingdom unless they are born again, John 3:5 states that the new birth is a requirement for entering the kingdom: “unless one is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This is a statement about the entrance requirement for the kingdom of God. Those who have not been born again are not able to see the kingdom, and they are not permitted to enter it.

Then Jesus says in John 3:7–8, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Those who are born again are born of the Spirit (cf. 3:6), and just as the wind blows where it pleases, so the Spirit gives new birth to whom he pleases. Humans do not control the wind, nor do they control the new birth.

John 6:63 provides yet more insight into the Spirit’s role in regeneration. We read, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail” (John 6:63). Not only does the Spirit blow where he pleases without regard to what humans know of him (3:8), the flesh cannot bring about the life that the Spirit gives (6:63). The final phrase of John 6:63 adds an important element regarding the new birth. Jesus says, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” This text seems to mean that the Spirit gives life to people through the word of Jesus. I take this to mean that when the Spirit gives life to those who hear the words of Jesus, they experience the new birth, gain the ability to see

the kingdom (3:3), believe what they have heard Jesus say (cf. 6:40), and are thereby qualified to enter the kingdom (3:5).

John's account of Jesus' teaching on the new birth may very well undergird what Paul writes to the Ephesians on the same subject in Ephesians 2:1–5. In Ephesians 2:1 Paul writes that the Ephesian Christians were formerly dead in their trespasses and sins, and then he explains what that means in the next two verses. They followed the course of this world, they followed Satan, they lived in the passions of their flesh, and they did what their bodies and their minds wanted to do (2:2–3). By switching from the second person plural in verse 1 to the first person plural in verse 3, Paul shows that this is not a condition limited to the recipients of his letter but one that he too experienced prior to conversion. All humans born outside Eden are born dead in trespasses and sins.

It is important to observe that being dead in one's trespasses and sins means that one lives in one's own free will: "carrying out the desires of the body and the mind" (Eph 2:3). Prior to conversion, humans do exactly what they want to do, and what they want to do is follow the world and the devil, with the result that they are "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (2:1–3). No one is forced to live this way. We are very happy making our free choice to be miserable rebels. Nor is this something from which a human can deliver himself by his free will precisely because it is what his free will has chosen.¹⁹ He does not want to be delivered. "There is no one who seeks God" (Rom 3:11). He wants what he has chosen. He chose it freely.

Humans freely choose to be children of wrath, but, Paul explains, God intervenes. Ephesians 2:4 reads, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which

¹⁹ This statement entails a rejection of libertarian freedom. Libertarian freedom may be philosophically defensible, but I do not believe the notion can be reconciled with what the Bible says (cf. e.g., Gen 6:5; 8:21; Jer 13:23; 17:9; Rom 3:9–18; 8:7–8; 1 Cor 2:14, etc.). My colleague Ben Phillips has pointed out to me that if a philosophical position cannot be reconciled with Scripture, it will ultimately prove philosophically indefensible as well.

he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4–5; cf. Rom 5:6–8). When Paul opens this statement with the words “But God,” he makes it plain that while the human is responsible for what is described in 2:1–3, God is responsible for what is described beginning in 2:4. The next two phrases in verse 4 explain why God saves people. Paul does not say that God is obligated to save people since they responded to him in a certain way, he says that God is “rich in mercy” (2:4). Lest it be thought that the richness of God’s mercy is due to some condition which the human has fulfilled, Paul explains that this mercy is based on the love of God—it arises from within him. God is rich in mercy “because of the great love with which he loved us” (2:4).

The first phrase of verse 5 excludes any possibility of synergism between God and man. Having explained in verse 4 that God saves because of his own free mercy and love, Paul reiterates the fact that God does not save humans because they are improving themselves. Rather, resuming the thought of verse 1, Paul prefaces the statement about what God did with the words “even when we were dead in our trespasses” (2:5). Then the next phrase explains what God did to save these people who were dead in sin: he “made us alive together with Christ” (2:5).

This is regeneration. Dead people get made alive by God. These dead people were not taking steps toward God. They were dead in sin when they were made alive. These dead people did not do anything to prompt God to make them alive. These dead people in Ephesians 2 were exercising their free will to fulfill the desires of their sinful flesh and fallen minds when God made them alive. God did not make them alive because he owed them anything but because of his own free mercy and love. For this reason Paul adds the final phrase of verse 5, “by grace you have been saved.” These dead people did not choose salvation, they did not earn it, and they deserved God’s wrath. They were dead and God mercifully, lovingly, graciously made them alive. Thus, in my judgment, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* has it right: “Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of

God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" (*BF&M 2000*, IV.A).

This is the liberating good news that we must proclaim. In this supernatural regeneration no one is forced to do anything against his will. Rather, people are enabled to do what anyone with the ability to perceive God as he is in Christ would do, namely, trust him. Regeneration frees people from bondage to sin and enables them to behold Christ and believe in him (cf. John 6:40; Rom 6:17–18). The regeneration of people depends upon the proclamation of the word and the movement of the Spirit. If the Spirit does not give life, the flesh will profit nothing (John 6:63). And the Spirit does not give life to those who do not hear the word, for "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).²⁰ Those who understand the power of God's word and Spirit agree with Walter Schultz, who writes, "It is, by definition, impossible for a human to generate such knowledge, holiness, and joy by any effort of will."²¹

If we do not believe in the power of the Spirit, and if we do not understand regeneration, we will continue to employ manipulative, coercive methods that result in so-called conversions which do not bear the fruits of regeneration. These methods reflect an implicit rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture and the power of the Spirit. If we do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, we will preach our own ideas rather than the Bible, and we will "do what works" even if it goes against what the Bible says.

Emphasizing the supernatural work of God in regeneration is tantamount to emphasizing the power of God in salvation, and of this we must not be ashamed (cf. Rom 1:16). We do not cause ourselves to be born into this world, and we do not cause

²⁰ For further interaction with inclusivism and "accessibilism," see my review-essay of Terrance Tiessen's *Who Can Be Saved?* in *Trinity Journal* (2007), forthcoming.

²¹ Walter Schultz, "Jonathan Edwards's End of Creation: An Exposition and Defense," *JETS* 49 (2006), 271.

ourselves to be born again. We do not choose to be born of our mothers, and we do not choose to be born again. The Spirit blows wherever he pleases. Once regenerated, we have eyes to see Jesus, and in seeing him we see the most trustworthy person in existence. No one who sees him as he is would refuse to trust him. Regenerated people trust Christ.

We must preach the Word, and we must pray for God to give life by the Spirit. The good news is that God does save, even when people, like Paul, have no desire to be saved (cf. Acts 9; 1 Tim 1:12–17). If by a great movement of God many people get regenerated through our preaching of the word, the benefits for society will go far beyond what any conservative political machinations might hope to accomplish.

Church Discipline

Paul delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan so they would learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:19–20). He commanded the Thessalonians to avoid anyone who would not work and anyone who would not obey his instructions, warning the idle not as an enemy but as a brother (2 Thess 3:6–15). He instructed the Corinthians to deliver an immoral man in their midst over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5, cf. 1–5). These texts tell us that Paul saw church discipline as an evangelistic tool. Those who act like non-Christians are put outside the church, God’s realm, into the world, Satan’s realm, in the hope that they will repent. Those who do not act like Christians should not be treated like Christians, lest they be surprised on the last day (cf. Matt 7:21–23). Paul’s instructions about restoration show that he intends for the repentant to be restored to the church (2 Cor 2:5–11; Gal 6:1). These texts also tell us that Paul expects individual churches to uphold the standard of Christian ethical conduct.

By contrast, Paul explains to the Corinthians that he does not expect them to “judge outsiders.” He wants nothing to do with regulating the behavior of unbelievers (1

Cor 5:12, cf. 9–13). The Kingdom of God is advanced through the influence of the Gospel proclaimed and publicly portrayed by the pure church. The New Testament knows no directives for Christians to seek to influence imperial policy through political means. Christians are to submit to their rulers, pray for them, and proclaim the Gospel. Our task in the great commission is to make disciples, not laws. I am not suggesting that no Christians are called to pursue political vocations. I am saying that if the church is to be and do what she was commissioned to be and do, her warfare will be spiritual not political. Spiritual warfare will bear fruit in the political realm, but it seems that some have forsaken spiritual warfare for the political kind.

How do we discern whether those of us in vocational ministry are waging war according to the flesh or according to the Spirit?²² I would humbly suggest that two simple questions can help us gauge the weapons of which we are most confident: (1) Do we spend more time reading the Bible than, for instance, political commentary? And (2) Do we spend more time in prayer than we spend networking with influential people? Our answers to such questions reveal where we think the power is.

Just as Paul's teaching on regeneration probably grows out of statements Jesus made about the new birth, Paul's teaching on church discipline can also be seen to be based on what Jesus said. Jesus gave his followers a process whereby they were to confront sinners and exclude the unrepentant in Matthew 18:15–20. The instructions Jesus gave in Matthew 18 probably provide the background for Paul's comments on church discipline, particularly in Titus 3:10–11, where Paul alludes to several warnings that culminate in the exclusion of the divisive person.

²² I phrase the statement this way to allow for the reality that Christians called to political vocations will probably spend more time in their vocational pursuits than in their personal devotions. The challenge for them will be to live the faith in their vocation.

In *God's Indwelling Presence*, I argued that when Jesus imparted the Spirit to his disciples in John 20:20–22 he made them the new temple.²³ Under the old covenant, the temple was the place of God's dwelling and the place where sin was dealt with so that God could dwell among his people. When Jesus breathed upon his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22), the gift of the Spirit anticipated by earlier texts in John's Gospel was realized (cf. esp. John 7:39; 14:17). In John 14:16–17 Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit, which the world can not receive, would remain in them forever. No longer would worship be in Jerusalem (cf. John 4:21–24). After Jesus imparted the Spirit to his disciples, they would worship him in spirit and truth wherever they gathered in his name. After Jesus imparted the Spirit to his disciples in John 20:22, he immediately restated concepts he had communicated earlier both to Peter (Matt 16:19) and his followers in general (Matt 18:18), saying, "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld" (John 20:23).

As the new temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the followers of Jesus are the place where God dwells and they have authority to grant and withhold forgiveness. This matches what Jesus said to Peter about "the keys of the kingdom" and "binding" and "loosing" on earth and in heaven (Matt 16:19). This is also similar to what Jesus said to his disciples as he taught on church discipline in Matthew 18, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18).

The understanding of the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit informs Paul's warning about how ministers build on the foundation he laid in 1 Corinthians 3:10–17 as well as his call to the Corinthians to separate from unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. Paul quotes Leviticus 26:11–12 in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18 to make the point that just as

²³ See Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence*, 143–60.

the old covenant people of God had to keep the dwelling of God pure, so the new covenant people of God must keep the church pure.

The church is the bride of Christ. He “gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25–27). If we care about what Christ clearly cares about—the purity of the church—we will join Paul in working with him, urging professing believers not to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor 6:1).

Our task in church discipline is not only corrective, it is also formative. Formative church discipline fulfills the great commission as we carry out the task of teaching believers to observe everything Jesus commanded (Matt 28:20). This will intersect with the moral, political, and social issues of the day, but we should be careful to derive our positions from Scripture. We must show the connection between what we believe and what the Bible says, and we must not go beyond the Bible. Requiring a stricter ethical code than the one given in the Bible denies the sufficiency of Scripture and calls God’s wisdom into question.

Moreover, some contexts will require us to distinguish between what we say to believers and what we say to unbelievers. Our task is to teach believers the commands of Jesus and proclaim the Gospel to the unbelieving world. If we moralize the unbelieving world, we run risks in at least two directions. On the one hand, we could create a class of legalists who are convinced of our arguments. These people will inevitably be proud of their morality, and they might not feel their need to believe in Jesus because they do not perceive their own sinfulness. After all, they live as we would have them live. On the other hand, those who reject our moralism might close their ears to the Gospel.

I am not saying that we should not engage unbelievers regarding what is best for society as a whole. Some Christians are no doubt called to reason with people on what is most rational, most secure, most healthy, etc. But we should be careful to preserve the

distinction between reasoning with people for their temporal benefit and explaining Christianity to them. If they are going to close their ears to us, we should do everything we can to make sure that what they heard from us when they decided to stop listening was the message of the Gospel rather than some other message. Let us do everything we can to make sure that they are rejecting us because they are rejecting Jesus, not because they are rejecting a particular party or candidate.

Formative church discipline has an important role to play in the wider society. Jesus prayed that God would sanctify his people through his word (John 17:17). In teaching Christians the Bible, we equip Christians to live radical lives of self-sacrificial neighbor love (John 13:34–35). As this self-inconveniencing love compounds in the virtue of many lives in the church, the church really will be a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. Christians living as Christians because they are being taught the truths of the faith at church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15), will affect society. Not because they set out to change the world, but because they will be the fragrance of Christ (2 Cor 2:14–16).

Formative church discipline simply means that we will teach people the Bible. In teaching them the Bible, their minds will be sharpened and they will become more able to think biblically about the social and political issues of the day. Some of these sharpened Christians will no doubt be called into political vocations, and their convictions will, by the power of the Spirit, rise above the crass utilitarianism that causes politicians to co-opt religious language for votes.

Corrective church discipline also has its part to play in affecting society at large. Politicians who are members of Christian churches should be made aware of the reality that if they are sinful and unrepentant, the local church of which they are a part will indeed discipline them. This is how the church can influence politicians, but this fearful power is only rightly exercised if we are seeking to preserve regenerate church membership, which results from a proper understanding of what it means to be born

again, if we are seeking to preach the word, which results in those who have been properly trained by the church's formative discipline, and if we are seeking what is spiritually best for the soul of the brother or sister facing corrective discipline.

If the church truly wants to influence the society, the best course of action is not for the church to seek to be something it is not—a kingdom of this world. The best course of action for the church is for her to be what she is. She is a group of regenerated believers in Jesus who have entered into a solemn covenant with the Lord and one another to pursue holiness of life and proclaim the Gospel. If evangelical churches in America want to influence the public square, they should make clear what the new birth is, why it is needed (spiritual death and human inability), how it comes about (the Spirit making the human able to understand the Gospel), and what its fruits are (obedience to Jesus). Building on that, churches must maintain their purity through formative and corrective church discipline.

Is This a Return to Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism was not wrong to “contend earnestly for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). Nor was fundamentalism wrong to “hold firmly to the trustworthy word as taught” (Tit 1:9). It seems that the error of some fundamentalists was that they contended for non-essential doctrines with the same tenacity that they contended for essential ones. This calls for wisdom.

In our pursuit of humble, generous orthodoxy, we cannot become so humble that the word of the sovereign King revealed in the Bible is not allowed to mean what it says. Such “humility” is really pride. God has spoken in his word. And we cannot become so generous that we give away the faith. This course of action would not be orthodox. The challenge before us is to rightly discern what is essential and what is not. We cannot let go of the essential things, and while we may retain our preferred non-essentials, we need

not evangelize for them as we do for the essentials. People must trust Jesus to be Christians, but they need not be pre-millennial.

Conclusion

People who measure power by worldly standards will not be impressed with what I have suggested in this essay. Lobbying Washington, cultivating voters, and political activity generally seems much more relevant, visible, and effective. People who measure wisdom by worldly standards will, of course, agree with this assessment.

But those who walk by the Spirit not the flesh, those who know that Jesus will build his church, that God has exalted above all things his name and his word, that morality saves no one, that God shames the strong with the weak and the wise with the foolish will know that though the world count the church as weak scum, those who are with us are more than those who are with them. God's purposes will not fail. We walk by faith, not sight. The church has been called to proclaim the Gospel, to make disciples, and to pray. These are the weapons of our warfare. Let us be those who, because we know the Lord and know he reigns, are about our Father's business.²⁴

²⁴ I wish to thank my colleagues Miles Mullin and Ben Phillips, who read this essay and offered many helpful suggestions.