

Thoughts on the Evangelical Church, by Mark Dattoli

In my younger days I experienced some major discouragement with my local Baptist church, and I seemed to be singularly alone in my discontent. At one point in a congregation meeting, after I suggested that we might audit our programs for effectiveness, an elder jumped up and reprimanded me saying "There's no way we could possibly improve this church." I thought he was kidding and someone would defend my point. The silence was deafening.

So began my research project into the broader evangelical church. I found my own thoughts echoed profusely in the written sentiments of many well-known leaders. I compiled the following pages which at the time validated my thinking and eased my distress to a degree.

My research didn't resolve the issues that I saw in the church, however. I needed some time to come to terms with the reality I faced, namely: I know without doubt that the church is Christ's ordained institution and that I'm commanded to be a part of it, yet the flaws flowing from its human dimension seemed to be rendering it almost null and void.

The question that remained for me to resolve was how could I find my place in Christ's body when, frankly, I couldn't stand it? When I stayed away from church, my relationship with God seemed to improve; when I attended, I merely got depressed.

The resolution began the day I read this quote: "The church is like Noah's ark. If it were not for the storm on the outside, I wouldn't be able to stand the stench on the inside." Ultimately, I came to terms with the church. In fact, today I love it and the people in it. I'm committed to it and to serving its people. But I still remember well the pain of feeling like a man without a country or a child without a home.

I believe there are many others who don't feel comfortable in the local church, and could benefit to know they are not alone. As you read the following pages which I compiled in the mid-1980s, please understand that while I feel most of it is still probably true, it doesn't have to be distressing or maddening. Growth and improvement come from understanding that a problem exists. I hope you'll interpret it that way as well.

Some Quotes about the Church

Os Guinness. The church is being sabotaged from within by complacency and unconscious worldliness.

C. Colson (Prison Fellowship). Tragically, the church has become so comfortable with the culture, it can no longer see the bankruptcy of its egocentric, materialistic ways. A fat, lethargic church, preoccupied with its own entertainment holds no appeal for those in need.

Rasmussen. The great sin of the church is to be so interested in serving those within it that it cannot serve the needs of those without.

R. C. Halverson (U. S. Senate Chaplain). I am deeply concerned about the inculturization of evangelicals. They are infected by a very subtle worldliness -- materialism and comfort in this world. They seem to be very much a part of this world rather than the kingdom of God.

V. Grounds (President Emeritus, Conservative Baptist Seminary). We need to examine ourselves, then, asking whether our motivation is honestly to glorify God, or to please men as we conform to evangelical traditions that have a very debatable biblical sanction... whether our values are honestly those of the New Testament or those of American society -- money, cars, clothes, comfort, security, success. We need to ask ourselves whether as Christians who preach non-conformity to the world, we may be blind to our own subtle worldliness, our sensualism, materialism and egotism.

J. Moody (Pastor, West Palm Beach Church). I want to level the charge that history may record that America died because its spiritual wellsprings dried up due to the fact that the churches were fighting over the wrong issues. When will we learn that, to the man in the street, the issue is not Bultmann and Barth, but babies and bills?

We have on our hands a dry-eyed church in a hell-bound world.

We cannot win if we pit a lukewarm church against a burning paganism.

R. Foster (Author, *Celebration of Discipline*). It is an occupational hazard of devout folk to become stuffy bores. That should not be. Jesus rejoiced so fully in life that He was accused of being a wine-bibber and a glutton. Many of us lead such sour lives that we couldn't possibly be accused of such things.

R. W. Emerson. Every Stoic was a Stoic, but in Christendom, where is the Christian?

O'Malley. There are ten church members by inheritance for every one by conviction.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The churches have killed their Christ.

Jimmy Carter. Churches are much more lethargic, much more self-satisfied, much more committed to the status quo, and much more self-righteous, proud. They are without a built-in, inherent mechanism by which there is a reexamination of performance, a judgment against a standard of excellence, and a degree of competition to see who can carry out God's word in the most dedicated and efficient manner.

Billy Graham. I believe, ladies and gentlemen, that we need, in the church today, a new Puritanism, a new discipline in our personal lives. We need to know what it means to be separated from the world and separated unto God again. The nightclub is now in our homes, the burlesque is now in our homes. We've become more and more tolerant to it all. How much has it robbed us of our spiritual power?

J. Engel & W. Norton (Authors, *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?*). There is plenty of harvesting equipment -- churches, powerful radio stations, vast printing facilities, mission boards that span the world. Yet, all too often the cutting blades are missing -- there is much action but no harvest. ... Unfortunately, the church in most quarters today is in an effectiveness crisis... Churches in the liberal camp that deny the basic historic fundamentals of the Christian religion have deteriorated even further to the point of an effectiveness calamity... Church history also reveals some sobering lessons. When the church retrenches into a static policy of resistance to change, it becomes a mere empty shell. The exterior trappings may appear adequate, but the interior vitality has long since expired. This, of course, is typical of a church in effectiveness crisis -- going on, business as usual. ... It almost seems as if we expect *people to adapt* to the programs of the church. The fact is that people are under no obligation to do so, and it is a complete abrogation of biblical principles to maintain such an orientation. The church must show that it is responsive to the society in which it exists. If this cannot be demonstrated, the survival of organized Christian religion is at stake. ... Program orientation can create a church that is outwardly orthodox and prospering but is spiritually bankrupt inwardly. The emphasis becomes one of maintenance of the organization rather than ministry to the Body of Christ and to the world. The result is an easy kind of complacency in which little is demanded of, or given to, members of the congregation, and the paid staff assumes a dominating position. Those who do not conform are viewed with suspicion, and Christianity as a lifestyle becomes a very comfortable part of the milieu in which it exists. Quite different results are achieved when decisions are made on the basis of analysis of the environment and adaptation of programs to the needs that will emerge. Change is required in a changing world!

Francis Schaeffer (Theologian, Author, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*). Having turned away from the knowledge given by God, the Christian influence on the whole of culture has been lost. In Europe, including England, it took many years -- in the United States only a few decades. In the United States, in the short span from the twenties to the sixties, we have seen a complete shift. Ours is a post-Christian world in which Christianity, not only in

the number of Christians but in cultural emphasis and cultural result, is no longer the consensus or ethos of our society. If the truth of the Christian faith is in fact *truth*, then it stands in antithesis to the ideas and the immorality of our age, and it must be *practiced* both in teaching and practical action. Truth demands confrontation. It must be loving confrontation, but there must be confrontation nonetheless. Sadly we must say that this has seldom happened. Most of the evangelical world has not been active in the battle, or even been able to see that we are in a battle. And when it comes to the issues of the day the evangelical world most often has said nothing; or worse has said nothing different from what the world would say.

Here is the great evangelical disaster -- the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this -- namely *accommodation*: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age. First, there has been the accommodation on Scripture, so that many who call themselves evangelicals hold a weakened view of the Bible.... And second, there has been accommodation on the issues, with no clear stand being taken even on matters of life and death....

And let us understand that to accommodate to the world spirit about us in our age is nothing less than the most gross form of worldliness in the proper definition of that word. And with this proper definition of worldliness, we must say with tears that, with exceptions, the evangelical church is worldly and not faithful to the living Christ.

Franky Schaeffer (Author, *Bad News for Modern Man*). Yet all of the above notwithstanding, the evangelical establishment sleeps on, ironically finding more and more reasons to do less and less about a deteriorating situation. ... I always think it's rather pitiful to read, "He died in his sleep." This seems to be the epitaph the evangelical and Christian community is after, however....

The undivorced family, the mother who puts the care of her children above career, the father who puts a Christian way of life above selfish materialism, the teenager or adult who is interested in God's Word -- these are the few who are living the full, beautiful, Christian moral life. ... Christians who have not been completely co-opted by the world, who have not been hopelessly infiltrated, who are not compromising, and at the same time who are exhibiting beauty, love, and life, have become so rare that indeed they now represent an oasis of sanity in the midst of an insane world. ...

The secular world is untouched by a pietistic and retreating church, a church always trying to "see the other point of view," a church never willing to make a stand, a church which regards all social questions as "too complicated" to warrant involvement... The secular world will pay no attention, and is paying no attention, to such a bankrupt church....

The fire has gone out of much evangelical Christianity in this country. One has to look no further for proof of this failure than the culture around us. Any Christian reading the ridiculous polls, which purport to show that there are forty to fifty million "evangelicals," and drawing comfort from such reports, is truly misled. Why, if there are so many believing Christians, is the culture moving so radically in the opposite

direction of the Christian faith? Why, if all these Christian colleges, Christian high schools, and primary schools are doing a good job, do they continually graduate students who are so ill prepared to meet the challenges of the world, unaware of the distinction between the Christian mind and the humanistic and secularistic mind? ... The answer is simple. Pietism and nonapplied, nonconfrontational, liberal, fashion-conscious, compromising Christianity has overtaken evangelicalism... to such a degree that it is doubtful that we are going to be able to make a real stand.

W. McKay & G. Barns (Authors, *Vital Signs*). Many born-again people want faith to be easy. They are not interested in hearing about -- much less experiencing -- the suffering that following Jesus may demand... or the seeking of God's will, or the material sacrifices that are expected... Phrases that motivate the body builder, like 'no strain, no gain,' are anathema to many Christians.... The U.S. has become a hedonistic heaven, and American Christians, no less than avowed secularists, have fallen prey to materialism, hedonism, secular humanism and even a jaded form of Christianity that rejects much of the commitment required of faithful servants.... Most Christians know that materialism is not of God. In fact, 84 percent of the born-again people in this nation believe that the United States is too materialistic and should be less so. But these same people do not perceive themselves to be part of the problem.

Christians, as a rule, do not possess political philosophies that transcend the superficial.... Christians are politically illiterate. The majority of Christians remain inactive and unconcerned about policy developments.

Despite widespread agreement among Christians that divorce is detrimental to the family... born-again individuals are every bit as likely to have suffered the agony of a broken marriage.

Despite the millions of dollars spent on media ministry and evangelistic publishing, there has been no real growth in the size of the Christian population in the past five years. (book published 1984)

Arthur Wallis (Author, *The Radical Christian*). It is an hour of decision and destiny for the Church. Growing numbers of God's people are coming to "the plains of Moab." Either they will move on with God, cross the Jordan and enter their rest and inheritance; or they will settle for what they are currently enjoying and cling to the "safety" of that which is institutional and traditional.

Dave Mains (Speaker, *Chapel of the Air*). What corruptions encroach upon our God-given concerns when prophets become known as people who enjoy luxury, excuse personal sins if the public is tolerant enough, are so busy we have no time to become godly, subtly promote our own names and faces and kingdoms beyond that of our Lord's, no longer thunder or weep?

...What will be the disastrous consequences if this continues? We should be especially upset when we prophets begin to emulate kings.

America today stands in great need of genuine revival. More than that, the church in this land is basically backslidden. This is a given that sooner or later must be recognized. Deeper yet, pastors still preach sermons with little sense of urgency, no tears are in their eyes or special anointing rests upon them during preparation or delivery. Instead, it is business as usual.

...Therefore, I pray for a sense of dissatisfaction to grow among us as to the true condition of the cause of the Kingdom.

Eugene Rubingh (Mission executive, Christian Reformed Church). Christians too often share the world's perspective on success ... It provides us license to squander ... Such a viewpoint squelches our outrage. It is necessary to stay pretty quiet as long as one enjoys the worldview of the enemy's kingdom. We give vent to great amounts of indignation against other Christians, particularly on theological matters. Our anger is well honed on the issues of orthodoxy but less well versed in righteous wrath when it comes to issues of practice.

Billy Graham. The first hazard of evangelical success is to give in to *pride*... The second danger of success is that we may begin to rely on *worldly carnal methods* to continue it... Thirdly, another danger we face in the midst of success is *traditionalism*, reliance on old methods because they have been effective in the past... If people in the evangelical community hadn't been willing to try new methods, at least half of our Christian work wouldn't be going on today. It takes some innovators, some people who are open to new ideas, to break the ice and get things moving... A fourth danger of success is that we may become short-sighted, *preoccupied with perpetuating an organization*.. Finally, success can make us *complacent*, thinking the battle has been won... An attitude of complacency can also lead to the self-destruction of the evangelical movement.

Jerry Bridges (Author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*). Many Christians have what we might call a "cultural holiness." They adapt to the character and behavior pattern of Christians around them. As the Christian culture around them is more or less holy, so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like Himself. ... Too many Christians, instead of resisting, are more and more giving ground to the world's constant pressure. A few years ago sincere Christians were quite selective about the movies they attended, if they attended them at all. Today the same movies that were avoided are being shown on television in the livingrooms of Christians across the nation.... The music we listen to often carries the message of the world, and the world uses the medium of music to squeeze us into its mold. And a Christian cannot help being gradually influenced if he continually listens to the world's music.... We must purify ourselves not only from the gross sins of the body, but also from the more "acceptable" sins of the spirit. Alas, here again we Christians have so often failed miserably. Focusing on our particular group's list of do's and don'ts, we neglect the inner life where envy, pride, bitterness, and a critical, unforgiving spirit may reign unchecked.

Richard Quebedeaux (Author, *The Worldly Evangelicals*). Because of better education and more money, evangelicals are getting more and more like everybody else. It's chic now to call yourself an evangelical... That has always been a real problem in the church because the minute respectability and acceptability come from the wider society, secularism and corruption come in as well. The church then becomes just another worldly institution... For so many evangelicals now, this life is pretty damn good. Who needs heaven?... One thing about evangelicals is that they can get into almost anything that the wider society is into to some degree or another. There aren't too many taboos left.... For instance, sexual attitudes among evangelicals in Sweden are much more liberal than they are among liberal evangelicals in this country... And there has been a lot of change in terms of sexual behavior and attitudes among evangelical young people. I'm afraid that evangelicals, just like the liberals did, are going to eventually wind up in some sort of new morality.... One of the sad things is that in the total religious academic establishment, nobody even talks about truth anymore... A lot of evangelicals don't realize that once you do that, you can relativize and take out of culture almost every ethical maxim in Scripture.... Most students these days are apathetic.

R. Jones (Author, *If I Were In My Thirties*). Young people are concerned about the apostate condition of the church and want to serve it as an instrument of renewal. People still go to church and the membership rolls are larger than ever. At the same time, the church seems to be making very little impact upon the individuals who belong to it or the culture of which they are a part.

Not only are young adults concerned about the materialism, racism, and legalism that still exists within the church, but they are also concerned about the lack of love and zeal for God. Our church services are often cold, formal, and ritualistic and our singing is merely a repetition of words that once stirred the emotions of great congregations. Our prayers are said in a perfunctory manner with very little consciousness that they are being addressed to the God of the universe who is present in our sanctuaries. Sermons are often filled with pious platitudes that are soon forgotten after the service as we talk with fellow church members about the things of this world that take priority in our lives.

Young adults today are aware that something is wrong with the church and they are not sure what it is, but they want to know.

While I rejoice in the growth of evangelicalism, I am at the same time concerned about the seeming lack of spiritual depth and understanding of the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures. We have become so absorbed with the desire to show visible and measurable growth that we have unconsciously compromised the gospel in order to make it more popular with the masses. In our reaction to the hell-fire and damnation preaching, for which we were once criticized, we have gone to the other extreme and become so positive that many of us no longer preach against the sins people commit; neither do we expect to see visible evidence of repentance. People are asked only to acknowledge that we are all sinners and to believe that Jesus died for us and then to pray a little prayer asking Him to save us. While it is true that we are sinners and it was necessary for Christ to die on the

cross in order for God to save us, we are never told in Scripture that by praying a little prayer we can be saved.

If I were in my thirties, the first thing I would do would be to admit the weaknesses and imperfections that exist within the churches of America. I would make a list of them... One lesson you should learn from the past is to be realistic about the church... You must learn to accept the church as it is with all of its flaws and imperfections, and yet never cease trying to correct them.

When spiritual renewal comes to our churches it will be reflected in the music of the choir and the singing of the congregation. Instead of expressing our worship through words and tunes written two or three centuries ago, we will be expressing the deep feelings implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through contemporary language and music. Pastors will reveal what God's Word has to say against the sins of adultery, drunkenness, selfishness, greed, oppression, injustice, and inequality. There will be tears of grief and sorrow as people repent of their sins.

R. C. Sproul (Theologian, Author, *From Dust to Glory*). There has never been a time in church history where the church as a whole was weaker in its worship of God. Most churches today simply don't understand what God requires in worship.

Annie Dillard (Author, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*). On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews, For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

Segue

- The church is like Noah's ark. If it were not for the storm on the outside, I wouldn't be able to stand the stench on the inside.
- It's not smart to rock the boat when you're in it.
- Don't look for the perfect church. As soon as you join it, boom! — there it goes!
- We all have strengths and weaknesses. We need to make our weaknesses irrelevant (P. Drucker). We are able to do that in the church because of the many parts of Christ's body.