



The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World

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"It takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant." These words begin this bold new work -- the culmination of David Wells's long-standing critique of the evangelical landscape. But to *live* as a true Protestant -- well, that's another matter.

This book is a jeremiad against "new" versions of evangelicalism -- marketers and emergents -- and a summons to return to the historic faith, defined by the Reformation *solus* (grace, faith, and Scripture alone) and by a high regard for doctrine.

Wells argues that historic, classical evangelicalism is marked by doctrinal seriousness, as opposed to the new movements of the marketing church and the emergent church. He energetically confronts the marketing communities and their tendency to try to win parishioners as consumers rather than worshipers, advertising the most palatable environment rather than trusting the truth to be attractive. He takes particular issue with the most popular evangelical movement in recent years -- the emergent church. Emergents, he says, are postmodern and postconservative and postfoundational, embracing a less absolute understanding of the authority of Scripture than traditionally held.

The Courage to Be Protestant is a forceful argument for the courage to be faithful to what Christianity in its biblical forms has always stood for, thereby securing hope for the church's future.

The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World Details

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From Reader Review The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World for online ebook

Scott says

A great summary of the previous 4 books Wells has written on culture. I think "Above All Earthly Pow'rs" is his best, and since it was such a paradigm shifting book for me, I confess that I didn't find the same passion in this volume than AAEP. Still, Wells is a great writer and The Courage to be Protestant is a great condensed version of his thought.

Justin Daniel says

I'll begin this by saying, this is by far one of the best books I have ever read. I have, for awhile now, contemplated the misdirection of the American Evangelical movement. We are a culture that is obsessed with self: Jesus came to die for MY sins; God wants ME to be happy, healthy, and wealthy now etc. But this is all a farce. The concept of the Gospel does not point to man or self, but to God. Not only this, but we have become the most technological civilization there has ever been at any point. The world is connected by the push of a button; we have hundreds if not thousands of 'friends' on Facebook; one can know within minutes the latest news stories on the opposite coast and on the other side of the world. But instead of becoming more connected, we have privatized our lives so that community is becoming non-existent. One no longer knows those in his local community which normally would encourage accountability, but this is quickly disappearing. This is a foundation we have built for ourselves: one that rests on emotionalism, felt-needs, a lack of doctrine and other factors that have invaded our churches. And this my friends, is why the American Evangelical church is dying.

Wells contributes this slow death to three movements: the marketers, the emergents, and the postmodernists. He begins the book with "the Lay of the Evangelical Land," and in the first sentence shocks the reader with this:

"It take no courage to sign up as a Protestant. After all, million have done so throughout the West. They are not in any peril. To live by the truths of historic Protestantism, however, is a entirely different matter. That takes courage in today's context."

He then breaks down these three movements but has a consistent theme throughout his book: the lack of a doctrinal foundation. He says,

"What happened, though, was that this doctrinal vision began to contract. The goal that diversity in secondary matters would be welcomed quite soon passed over into an attitude that evangelicalism could in fact be reduced simply to its core principles of Scripture and Christ. In hindsight, it is now rather clear that the toleration of diversity slowly became an indifference toward much of the fabric of belief that makes up Christian faith... The erosion in biblical ways of thinking at first passed almost unnoticed. Nevertheless, after a while it was hard to miss the fact that this was happening. No doubt there were many specific causes. Campus organizations were undoubtedly reducing Christian faith to its most minimal form. And as serious biblical preaching in the churches diminished, ignorance of biblical truth became commonplace. But the largest factor in this internal change, I think, was that evangelicalism began to be infested by the culture in which it was living. And then Christianity became increasingly reduced simply to private, internal, therapeutic experience. Its doctrinal form atrophied and then crumbled."

He begins with the marketers: these are the "seeker-sensitive's", those who place the idea of what people think before the Gospel message. For example, there was a church not long ago that sent out surveys to the local community to find out what kind of music they liked and then, based on the outcome of the surveys, spliced the most popular music into their church service to appease people. He argues this mentality of turning the church into a business comes from our economic world where numbers (such as attendance and money) are placed in front of doctrine. When we begin to let the culture influence the church, the church will crumble, as Wells puts it here:

"The truth is that without a biblical understanding of why God instituted it, the church easily becomes a liability in a market where it competes only with the greatest of difficulty against religious fare available in the convenience of one's living room and in a culture bent on distraction and entertainment... The constant cultural bombardment of individualism, in the absence of a robust theology, meant that faith that had rightly been understood as personal now easily became faith that was individualistic, self-focused, and consumer oriented. That was the change to which the church marketers attuned themselves. Instead of seeing this as a weakness to be resisted, they used it as an opportunity to be exploited. Increasingly, evangelical faith was released from any connections with the past, from every consideration except the self, and was imbued with no other objective than entrepreneurial success. As the evangelical experience was thus cut loose, it became increasingly cultural, increasingly empty, and increasingly superficial."

Some churches have gone as far as leaving out key doctrines of the Gospel, such as the doctrine of sin, to cater to the "felt-needs" of the congregation. But the real irony is that Christians will flock to churches that have a strong doctrinal and preaching foundation:

"What were these people looking for in a church? If we believe all the church-marketing hype, we would have to conclude that potential customers wanted, above all else, not to hear issues of truth and belief. These should be avoided like the plague. These are matters, the prevailing wisdom says, that should be hidden from seekers because they are so dreadfully off-putting. Not so! In fact, 90 percent of those in Rainer's studies said the preaching was important to them, and not just any preaching. Almost the same percentage, 88 percent, said that what they came to hear was doctrine. The beliefs of the church were important to 91 percent. They

wanted to know what the church believed. They wanted to have this laid out for them - with conviction. This was their preeminent concern. The next issue of importance, the friendliness of people, was far down the list - only 49 percent cited it. Is this such a revolutionary discovery? Should we really be so amazed that people would like to know what Christians think and whether, in this age of jaded, faded, transient beliefs, there actually is something that can be believed for all time?"

Wells next attacks the Emergents, those who believe that the social gospel runs supreme, or who believe in existentialism. In both cases, the priority of doctrine is neglected and human thought or reason is the ultimate end to the churches many problems.

Wells ends his book with a word of criticism he seems to get a lot: that it is great to diagnose what is wrong with the church, but how do we fix it? The point he makes is that if we believe that God is sovereign, it is in his will that we are to remain faithful to preaching and teaching the word of God and that he alone is able to make a change in the direction of the church.

I believe that my calling in this life is to enter into the ministry and begin to accept this great challenge: to remain faithful in the things God has given us and to pray that someday He will effect change. Whether I see the fruits of this labor is a non-issue as God is the one who has ultimate authority. This book was an eye-opening look on today's church in our self-absorbed culture and I recommend it to anyone who is involved in the church.

Douglas Wilson says

A fitting contribution to Wells' ongoing demolition of the pretensions of contemporary evangelicalism.

Peter N. says

I began at the end of Wells' five volume set on American evangelicals. The book was superb, though dated in a few places. I expected to read this book and find a critique of all those folks "out there." But instead I was convicted of how many areas I have bought into postmodern thinking. My desire for comfort, ease, the enthronement of self, and my too low view of sin all became clearer as I read the book. As the Stones say, "You can't always get what you want but if you try sometimes well you might find you get what you need." The book wasn't necessarily what I wanted or expected, but it was what I needed. For me it was more mirror of my thought than microscope to examine the culture.

David Westerfield says

In *The Courage to be Protestant*, David Wells notes there are three major groups splintering within the

evangelical church now that threaten the entire movement's original cause (though one of them is remaining faithful and seeks to preserve it). There are smaller groups that are splintering of course, but the focus is on the three major movements. The word "evangelicalism" is rooted in the word "evangel" which means Gospel. This was the fundamental basis upon which the phrase "evangelical" came into existence, starting either during or right before the times of the Puritans (based upon the fact that John Owen and Jonathan Edwards used the term themselves in their writings). Now though, things are taking a drastic turn; a turn, in fact, that has not been witnessed in its entire history since the Reformation.

These three distinct groups that are "emerging" (no pun intended) are the Truth-lovers, those who hold a historic protestant understanding of the Gospel as recovered in the Reformation (though all of these people are not necessarily Reformed); the Marketers, that is those who hold to using corporate marketing techniques to, in a sense, manipulate people into the church (marketing primarily to an aging baby-boomer generation); and the Emergents, those who believe it is necessary to adapt and morph Biblical, theological and historical understanding to our postmodern culture in an effort to win them for Christ (marketing themselves primarily to my generation).

While not doubting the good intentions and desires of the Marketers and Emergents, Wells brings stinging indictments that reveals their shift on crucial doctrines of the Gospel itself, which Satan has historically used to tear the church apart from within and eclipse the Gospel, all in the name of Christianity. I have not been able to put this book down it is so good. It has really made me consider the need to be even more courageous (yet loving) to hold fast to historic Protestantism (that is the Gospel) in the face of those, even within our churches unfortunately, who employ worldly means to bring people in and in some cases attempt to save themselves through their own doing and "Jesus' help".

Within the Marketing and Emergent movements, everything under the sun (including substitutionary atonement even! Check out Al Mohler in this sermon) is being redefined outside of historic, Biblical definitions, but is instead defined upon what our culture thinks, says and wants. However though, in a lot of cases, historic doctrines are held, yet pastors and teachers seem to be ashamed of them and lighten them up significantly, or just never speak about them in the pulpit at all. Are you ashamed of the doctrines of hell, wrath, sin, justice, predestination even? Jesus Himself spoke more about hell than anyone, yet some teachers would make Jesus out to be this guy who spoke some hippie love language.

Shouldn't we possibly be willing to talk about that which is uncomfortable (sin and wrath in particular) because it is a prerequisite for getting the Gospel right? Isn't that why people hate us Christians to begin with, precisely because the Gospel is an offensive message to sinful man? And if our message is not met with a good level of opposition, could there possibly be something wrong with our message? It's the truth, is it not? The Marketers sure do seem to be ashamed of these hard truths though. Are you ashamed of the Bible speaking in terms of absolute truth? The Emergents clearly are, because a majority of people in our culture now are not sure there is any absolute truth, and the Emergents are folding to the pressure to be culturally relevant. They therefore shape their message to fit what the culture wants.

This book is a clear wakeup call for the evangelical church to recover it's Gospel-roots as its primary focus and not shift on Biblical language, so that we may preserve the movements' initial cause: the glory of God and the Gospel through which people may be reconciled to God. Either we recover our roots and threads that hold us together, or the historic evangelical cause will be lost. Unfortunately, David Wells believes the movement may already be lost and so it may be time to just move on and start a new movement of Gospel-centrality in the church, for both salvation and progressive sanctification (for growth in our faith). To me, it seems that a new movement is already under way with the advent of the "truth-lovers". David Wells, summed up, puts it like this in the book:

"It would be quite unrealistic to think that evangelicalism today could look exactly as it did fifty years ago, or a hundred, or five-hundred. At the same time, the truth by which it is constituted never changes because God, whose truth it is, never changes. There should therefore be threads of continuity that bind real Christian believing in all ages. It is some of those threads, I believe, that are now being lost....I do not know what the evangelical future will be, but I am certain evangelicalism has no good future unless it finds this kind of direction again."

Nowadays, you have everyone from the Oneness Pentecostals to Joel Osteen being called evangelical, yet Osteen is clear that he never wants to speak on anything negative, even if it is true, because it would offend people. Osteen is a Pelagian in his teaching of how people are saved, heresy condemned by an ecumenical early church council, The Council of Orange, in 529 A.D. And then T.D. Jakes does not believe in the Trinity, he's a Modalist/Sabellian, two heresies, both of which were condemned in the third and fourth centuries. These teachers not only deny historic ecumenical, early church doctrines on the nature of Christ, God, sin (doctrines that even the Roman Catholic Church holds, whom we Protestants have crucial disagreements with over the nature of salvation), but these guys also specifically deny the roots of evangelicalism in not preaching orthodox, Gospel truth. Yet they are called and labeled evangelical! And then if you criticize what they are teaching, that they are in error, in any fashion, you get labeled a bigot, most specifically within the church! There is something seriously wrong with that.

This is a totally unqualified quote with no backing or proof anyone actually said it, but it honestly would not surprise me with the way things are shifting in evangelicalism. Someone told me that a lady had left a Roman Catholic church to go to one of the nearby "evangelical" mega-churches (remaining anonymous) because, "They didn't teach the Trinity there and I just can't believe in that." If this is true (which again, not sure it is), volumes can be said about the methodologies employed at the church, the messages being communicated, the lack of clear truth that isn't being taught, and most of all, the fact that there is no Gospel whatsoever (the root of evangelicalism), amongst a host of other things.

As those who hold to the historic truths of Christianity as particularly recovered in the Reformation, we must be willing to take abuse for the sake of Gospel-truth and not shift on those doctrines clearly shown to us in the Scriptures. That does not mean we have to stand up and be jerks toward those who differ. In fact, if this

just makes you angry and you know you'll just be mean, please keep quiet. Rather, we should lovingly confront error with the timeless truth of the Scriptures that has been passed down throughout the ages. This book is a proclamation and warning call to hold fast to what is true, even though our times dictate for us to shift our positions. David Wells says, "It takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant." However, to be a theologically historic Protestant is increasingly taking more guts. Lord, help us to hold fast to what is true by Your Spirit.

Kevin Summers says

Sample quote: "My conclusion is that absolute truth and morality are fast receding in society because their grounding in God as objective, as outside of ourself, as our transcendent point of reference, is disappearing." [my transcription of the audiobook]

Troy Solava says

I thoroughly enjoyed this work. Wells critiques and evaluates the church in a postmodern society. He explains how the Church has succumbed to a low view of God, Church membership and discipline, and sin. He not merely provides research but also communicates how the church today should live in this context. I believe all pastors/ministry leaders should read this book.

Paul says

Definitely one of the top books this year.

Mitch Bedzyk says

After outlining the history and the present state of evangelicalism, David Wells presents a solid and biblical case for the church retrieving the historic and doctrinally sound faith of the Reformation (i.e. the five Solas) for our present, postmodern, highly individualistic culture. He issues a clarion call for the evangelical church to return to "sola scriptura" (Scripture alone) and abandon its allegiance to "sola cultura" (culture alone).

I wish I knew about David Wells' and his work when this book was in its first edition in 2008. Reading this book when it was originally published would have been an absolute game changer for my understanding of what the church should be, how it should look, what it should prioritize, and what it needs to be "healthy." His critiques of the attractional and emergent churches alone are worth the price of the book. Highly recommended

Colin Buchanan says

Gold. Insightful and biblical, winsome and vital - very much a book for Christian leaders and thinkers (and churchgoers) to challenge the cultural defaults of consumerism, pragmatism and therapeutic-ism (!) and to do the hard work that's needed to see where we need to reclaim the biblical distinctives that ought to form the foundation for what church and worship and a Christian worldview are as well as what they spawn. Challenging, inspiring and a great book to share and discuss. Plus if you read this one you get a summary of Wells' earlier trilogy - a bonus for lazy readers! (My first review with the word "spawn" in it. Urgh.)

Matthew says

Wells gets straight to the point in his opening: "It takes no courage to sign up as a Protestant...To live by the truths of historic Protestantism, however, is an entirely different matter. That takes courage in today's context." The truths that Protestants have lived and died by have somehow become no more welcome within many Protestant churches today than in the outside, non-Christian culture. As Wells argues, those today who would seek to live by the distinctives of the theology of the Bible must have courage to stand not only against the world but against much of the church. An important read for the blighted day in which we live.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: From freedom to courage

Capping off a series that started with J. Gresham Machen's Christianity and Liberalism from the 1920s and Karl Barth's The Humanity of God from the 1950s is this survey by Wells of his last four books on modern Protestant theology in the "postmodern" world of the 21st century. The decline in the Christian doctrinal maturity of both churches and believers is so sharp and sudden since Machen and Barth that a theologian of orthodox Christianity like Wells is no longer emphasizing freedom, but calling for courage to stand firm against the culture, the world, and the culture of the world inside the church itself.

Wells spends a lot of time documenting the boom in evangelical Christianity after World War II, and the growth of megachurches, parachurch organizations, and church marketing techniques beginning in the 1980s. He also quotes anecdotal evidence along with statistical surveys showing both an increase in general "spirituality" at that same time period while there was a corresponding drop in orthodox Christian beliefs amongst those who self-identified as Christians. What is the correlation between these trends toward growth in numbers and decline in knowledge of God and the Bible? When churches turned to marketeering, they turned away from preaching the Bible in any serious, balanced, and orthodox way. Churches, says Wells, were just giving their "customers" (members) what they wanted: feel-good self-help spiritual pep talks. Doctrine and expository preaching would just turn people off and drive "customers" away.

Essentially Christianity in America and the affluent developed world has abandoned the doctrine of centuries that Machen and Barth were defending. Wells, writing in the early 21st century, can no longer find an orthodoxy to defend, rather he must find a path to its recovery. With the church joining the world and the culture in glorifying the self and not the God who created the soul, individual Christians claiming a saved soul do need courage:

Does it really demand that much courage for us to be counter-cultural enough to live this out?
Or are we just so muddled, so besotted by the thought of our own success, so fearful of
offending others, that we just cannot bring ourselves to say what is true?. . . A renewed

Protestantism, one that looks like it has in its high moments in the past, will have about it a joyous sense of knowing God, of knowing him through his Son, of being able to live in his world on his terms and celebrating his sovereign rule over all of it. . . . It will be sinewy and tough. It will not cave in intellectually to all the fads and rackets of our time. It will have an infectious joy in doing what is right. . . . This is something the self movement can only dream about. (p. 174)

Wells does a good job documenting the downslide in doctrine and the downside of the self-help culture, and describing the demanded courage of his title. Because his antidote is nothing more than the orthodoxy of the last 500 years of Protestantism, he spends little time describing it, which means that his analysis is heavily negative, which makes for heavy reading most of the way. There is not much here to cheer either the mind or the soul. It is needed nourishment with no dessert.

So from the dawn of the 20th century, Machen looked back at a trend to soften Christianity, from the middle of the century Barth looked to restore the freedom of Christianity to celebrate both the undivided humanity and deity of Jesus, and from the beginning of the 21st century Wells looks to recover an abandoned Christianity in the churches that still carry its name. Through those decades, God and the Bible have not changed, only man's mind and perceptions of them. That is the good news Christians can take away from this series.

Kent says

The book helpfully charts the splintering of evangelicalism into truth-lovers, marketers, and Emergents. The author suggests that much of our loss of voice today has to do with the fact that we have become sola scriptura in profession only, but in reality we have become sola cultura. The magnificent world that humanity has built today is ironically a place that is inhospitable to the human soul. And unfortunately, the church, instead of calling, men and women forth out of that culture, has instead sought to become more like the culture, the same culture that wreaks havoc on the human soul.

The church must recover the centrality of doctrine, absolute truth that comes to us from the outside, from above, from God, not that we intuitively discern. The church must also recognize that it is God who builds his church, both quantitatively and qualitatively. We are called to sow and water, but God is the one who brings the growth. Don't rethink how to do church! God is the one who sets the goals and methods of the church in Scripture, not business manuals, marketing savvy, or cultural norms.

These were some of the author's points that I appreciated. There were others.

Lee Button says

David Wells writes about evangelical church culture with the passion of a prophet and the understanding of a sociologist. He validates his claim that evangelicalism (is) infested by the culture in which it lives. p 8 The following pages describe the effects of this infestation and prescribe Gospel-centered solutions. Truth is lost in creative worship. Chapter 5, worth the price of the book, diagnosis culture's worship of self and it's move into the church. He closes with a reminder of God's Sovereignty and how reformation can begin.

Jonathan Klimek says

David Wells in his book, *The Courage to Be Protestant* highlights the history and present state of evangelicalism and then exhorts the Pastor to return to the historic and doctrinally sound Solas of the Reformation, especially Sola Scriptura in contrast to Sola Cultura—showing that God’s Word is often in sharp antithesis to what is regarded as “normal” in today’s culture (p. 4). He explains that postmodernism, individualism and liberalism has resulted in a diminished interest in the Word of God in the life of the church (p. 4). We need to call people to deny self (cf. Luke 9:23) in contrast to individualism (p. 9); teach doctrine, in contrast to the Emergents (p. 18); teach total depravity, in contrast to avoiding the word “sin” (p. 24, 30–31) or referring to sin as “emotional deficits” (p. 133); teach the Truth which can be known and understood, in contrast with Postmodernism which states that it is uncertain, elusive, out-of-reach (p. 53); teach the need to be God-centered, in contrast to the Individualism of today which is self-centered (p. 70). It is not surprising that the world doesn’t think they are in need of reconciliation with God (p. 137).

In light of the age that we live in, understanding that the congregation are going to have a natural bent towards that which meets their individual likes and preferences, that which entertains, that which is comfortable, that which boosts their egos, I need to be all the more careful to ensure that I don’t appeal to those seeker-sensitive cravings (p. 117) and market myself (p. 119), but rather preach the Word of God faithfully. When joining an existing church, I need to ensure the elders are Biblically qualified and not in those positions because of their attractive personalities (p. 122); that the church submits to and has placed herself under the authority of Scripture (p. 194); administers the sacraments (p. 203); disciplines the unrepentant (p. 204).

This book has been very enlightening and helpful to know what I am up against as I pursue Pastoral Ministry. I am thankful that God’s unchanging Word is sufficient.
