

EVANGELICAL PUBLISHING AND THE CRISIS OF OUR DAY

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Lane T. Dennis, Ph.D.

I am often asked, what is the most important thing that I do in my work. As I have reflected on this, it seems to me that this can be boiled down to three main things: (1) the first is *to communicate the vision of the company*; (2) the second is *to encourage commitment to the vision*; and (3) the third is *to provide leadership for others to carry out the vision*. Of course we would need to say much more about the content of the vision--for example, our commitment to Christ, to the Gospel and to the Truth of God's Word; our desire to honor Christ and give God the glory in all we do; and then something about how this gets worked out in our own specific business structures and strategies. But in all of this, the vision we have remains central and is at the heart of all we do.

If this is true for individual companies, it is equally true for ECPA. The most important thing that ECPA can do is to effectively communicate the common vision we have as evangelical Christian publishers; to encourage commitment to that vision; and to provide leadership and resources for each of us to effectively carry out this vision in our own publishing programs. So as I come to the end of my time in serving on the Board and my brief time as Chairman, my goal today is to reflect on how we can effectively carry out the common vision we share especially as this relates to what I have called the "Crisis of Our Day."

You will remember well the famous opening words of Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." I would suggest that these words might be seen as an apt description of our own times. For although we see moral and social disintegration of our society on all sides, it is also a time of tremendous opportunity. But before we can begin to respond effectively to our present crisis, we need to have a clear understanding of what we are up against.

What is the crisis of our times? In a recent address, David Wells offers the following description:

What is striking about our culture today is that its corruption is not simply at the edges.... It is not simply found among postmodern academics who are bent upon overturning all meaning and

moral principle, or among vicious street gangs, or among the vendors of pornography.... What is striking is that this corruption is ubiquitous. It is not located in this or that pocket of depravity but is spread like a dense fog throughout society....

"Wherever one looks," writes Robert Bork, "the traditional virtues of this culture are being lost, its vices multiplied, its values degraded--in short, the culture itself is unraveling." And the American public apparently agrees . . . [as] an overwhelming majority, 90%, believes that America is slipping ever deeper into "moral decline." ¹

This moral decline, this unraveling of the American cultural fabric, confronts us on many levels.

First, there are the *social consequences* of the crises reflected so clearly in raw statistical data:

Since 1960, population has increased by 41% but violent crime by 560%.... Since 1960 illegitimacy has increased by 400%. In 1960, 65.2% of Black children were born to unmarried mothers. And since *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, an estimated 28 million unborn children have lost their lives. Since 1960, the rate of teen suicides has risen more than 200%, making it the third leading cause of death among these young people. Since 1960, the divorce rate has increased 200% and the consequence is that less than 60% of children live with both of their biological parents.²

Similarly, since 1960 the rate of births to unmarried teenagers has nearly tripled, and the number of children being raised through Aid to Dependant Children has increased over 360%.³

But as disturbing as these raw statistics are, the thing we often miss is the terrible *human consequences* that this data represents. For these are not simply abstract numbers but men and women, boys and girls--people made in the image of God--whose lives have been shattered or cut short as a consequence of such sweeping moral disintegration. It is indeed hard to imagine the depth of depravity to which our culture has descended--as evidenced, for example, by the practice of what is known as "partial birth" abortion.⁴

But I would suggest that there is something of even greater concern for we who are evangelical Christians--and this is the *eternal consequences* of our current crisis. Beyond the social consequences and beyond the human consequences, the crisis of our day is at the heart a *spiritual crisis*. It is a spiritual crisis, first, in the sense that the spirit of our age is increasingly dominated by sin and by active rebellion against God. It is a spiritual crisis, further, because we cannot really expect any significant change apart from a spiritual solution. And it is a spiritual crisis, most importantly, because the consequence of sin, apart from salvation in Christ, is eternal separation from God--in that place which the Bible describes as hell, "where," Jesus says, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:42).

Within this broad context of moral decline and the unraveling of American culture, the secular response seems to be dominated by two opposite trends. On one hand there is a *deep longing* for spirituality, and on the other hand there is an *aggressive opposition* to everything spiritual and moral. In secular publishing, this longing is represented by an outpouring of books on near death experiences such as Betty Eadie's four-year best-seller *Embraced by the Light* and succession of similar "light books" (such as *Saved by the Light*, *Lessons from the Light*, *Closer to the Light*, *Transformed by the Light*, and *Peace in the Light*). This longing is represented further by the six-year best-selling cycle of "Angel books" (starting with Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels*) and a broad range of books by psychics, mediums, and apostles of the New Age.⁵

In contrast to these forms of vague spirituality, however, the opposite trend dominates the intellectual leaders of the day. Here, in the worldview known as postmodernism, we find the total rejection of truth and morality, and of every notion of spiritual reality. In this present phase,

Western culture has moved to reject the very notion of truth and to embrace relativism, nihilism, and radical subjectivism. Modernity has given way to postmodernity ... claiming that all notions of truth are socially constructed... [P]ostmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself, [and are engaged in] a deconstructionist project bent on the casting down of all religious, philosophical, political, and cultural authorities.⁶

The secular response, then, is dominated by these two opposite trends--on one hand, the pursuit of truth and spirituality in bizarre forms, and on the other hand the radical denial of truth, spirituality and moral absolutes, in the form of postmodern ideology. But I would suggest that both of these extremes find their root in the same source--that is, in Satan's strategy for waging spiritual warfare. For these extremes are simply two alternatives to the same strategy--whereby on one hand Satan disguises himself as "an angel of light" and on the other hand he carries out his work as the "father of lies."

Given the crisis of the day, what do we, as evangelical publishers have to offer? By God's grace we have been entrusted with the only answer and the only hope there is--the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is something we all take for granted. But there is a sense in which we need to be very clear about what this is. I say this because the surrounding culture is so ubiquitous, so pervasive, so powerful

that the evangelical world is increasingly dominated by the spirit of this age rather than by the Spirit of Christ.

What does it mean, then, to be an evangelical, and how does this relate to the crisis of our day? Some would say that the word "evangelical" has lost all meaning today--that it has become so vague and modified that we should abandon the use of the word altogether. But this is all the more reason to reaffirm what it means to be evangelical, because by abandoning the word, we are not just giving up a word. We are in danger, instead, of abandoning the essential truths of the Gospel that the evangelical faith has sought to preserve and proclaim.

Let me point first, then, to one broad characteristic and then to four specific characteristics of evangelicalism;⁷ and then, in light of this, to mention a number of specific challenges we face as evangelical Christian publishers.

The one broad characteristic that defines evangelicalism is its commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ--a commitment which runs through the stream of historic Christian orthodoxy. It begins with Christ Himself, the Scriptures and the Apostles; it continues through the early Church Fathers; it is further exemplified through the ages by Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Whitefield (and many others); and it is represented in our own century by such men as Henry, Graham, Packer, and Schaeffer (again, and many others). In other words, there is an historic flow and continuity of evangelical faith through the centuries, founded in the Person and work of Jesus Christ, contained in the Scriptures, and lived out by the Body of Christ.

But I would suggest that there are also four additional foundational characteristics of Evangelicalism which are essential for an effective response to the crisis of our age. These four characteristics may be summarized in terms of four words--Christ, Scripture, Commitment, and Compassion.

1. *Christ.* The first characteristic is summarized in the word *Christ*, and by this we mean that salvation is through Christ alone. More specifically, we mean that all mankind is helplessly and eternally lost, guilty of sin and under the wrath of God, and that we can be saved only by grace, through faith, in Christ alone Who died as our substitute in atonement for our sins. Apart from repenting from our sin and accepting Christ's work on our behalf, there is no hope for us personally nor for our culture.

2. *Scripture*. The second characteristic is summarized by *Scripture*, and by this we mean that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, it is our absolute and final authority, and it is sufficient in everything it teaches.

3. *Commitment*. The third characteristic is summarized by *commitment*, and by this we mean the necessity of a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This involves living out our faith and applying the truth of Scripture across the full spectrum of life.

4. *Compassion*. The fourth characteristic is summarized by the word *compassion*, and by this we mean a compassionate concern for the lost that results in *evangelism*--that is, in reaching out in compassionate, loving care with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only message of hope and salvation.

These, then, are the essentials of evangelical faith. But I would have us notice how radically they stand in opposition to the spirit of our age, and because of this, how formidable are the challenges we face. In contrast to the nihilism of postmodernism, evangelicalism proclaims there is absolute Truth and absolute morality. In contrast to the vague spiritual longings of the day, evangelicalism affirms that Jesus Christ alone is *the way, the truth and the life*, and that all other ways lead to eternal damnation. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul, "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to those who follow spiritual error, and foolishness to the postmodern mind, but to those whom God has called, it is the power of God unto salvation" (see I Cor. 1:23, 24).

Stated simply the Gospel is a scandal. There is no compatibility between the spirit of this dark age and the Spirit of Christ. More than this, the kingdoms of this world are aggressively hostile toward the kingdom of God (see I John 5:19). In fact, one of the themes that come through most clearly in Jesus' ministry is the opposition of the world to His ministry, and the hostility that we as His followers can expect. "If the world hates you," Jesus warned, "keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18, 19; see also: John 15:24, 16:33; 17:14; 1 John 2:15, 16, 3:13, 5:19, James 4:4).

With this in mind, I would like to turn briefly to the challenges we face as evangelical publishers, as we seek to publish the truth of the Gospel. Given the crisis of our day and the spirit of the world, we clearly do not have an easy task. This results in a number of specific challenges which I would summarize as follows:

(Let me mention a personal note here. Please note that I speak first and foremost to myself and our own publishing program, and that these challenges are not meant to be specific to anyone. I simply raise these because I am aware of how great challenges are for our own program, as well as the larger evangelical world.)

1. *The Challenge of Postmodern Ideology.* As David Wells says in the title of his influential book,⁸ there is "No Place for Truth" in our culture today. In a climate of open hostility to the Gospel, Christian books are unwelcome in the marketplace of ideas. The challenge here is that we will always have limited access (with some notable exceptions) to the general channels of distribution, because those who control these channels are not open to the truth we affirm and publish. And the more explicitly this truth is expressed in our books, the more limited our access will be within the general market. A related challenge, then, is how this affects the content of the books we publish, which leads to the next point.

2. *The Challenge of Accommodation.* As noted earlier, two of the essentials of evangelicalism are Christ's atoning death and the sufficiency of Scripture. Again this is not the message that the world wants to hear. The challenge we face is how to reach the world with compassion and commitment without accommodating the message. The challenge we face here is evident within the larger evangelical world--where the Gospel of Salvation is often reduced into a "step-by-step manual for happy living,"⁹ or into a politicized program for social ills, or into a marketable commodity for feeling good. The effect of accommodating the Gospel in this way is to deny the sufficiency of Christ's work and the sufficiency of God's Word.¹⁰ The challenge is not to compromise the scandal of the Gospel--the message of repentance, redemption and reconciliation through Christ alone--as we seek to demonstrate compassion for the lost. Although I have stressed the foundational truths of the Gospel, this does not mean that only "evangelistic" books should be published. In reality the truths of Scripture need to be expounded, applied

and published across to the full spectrum of life. As evangelical publishers we need to encourage the creative gifts of our authors to apply biblical truth and a biblical worldview in every area of life and within a wide variety of literature--from theology, to cultural studies, to issue books, to devotionals, to fiction--across the full spectrum of life. As Christians we are called to understand and engage our culture, but this must be done from a distinctively Biblical perspective, that does not accommodate the Gospel, and that remains faithful to the foundational truths of God's Word.

3. *The Challenge of Business Realities.* It is not easy to run a business of any kind in today's business climate, and this is perhaps true to an even greater degree in evangelical publishing. The turmoil and uncertainty of our industry over the last few years provide ample evidence. One of the key challenges here, as we all are aware, is how to balance the economic side with the ministry side of publishing. But I would suggest that the challenge to us as evangelical publishers may go beyond this to the important question of how Christian business activity should differ from the non-Christian drive for competitive domination of the competition. What does it mean to be competitors and still to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ? Does this place any limits on how we compete with one another? Similarly, how do deeply Christian qualities such as the fruit of the Spirit and the Sermon on the Mount relate to the realities of the marketplace and to competition with one another? Do we have responsibilities that go beyond or limit what might otherwise be acceptable secular business practice?

4. *The Challenge of Speaking the Truth in Love.* The last challenge I would mention is the challenge of what it means to be committed to the evangelical essentials. In this regard, there is the danger of erring in either of two ways. On the one hand, there is the danger of compromising the essentials for sake of unity. On the other hand there is the danger of demanding agreement on nonessentials at the expense of unity. Here we do well to follow Augustine's admonition: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity." We cannot have a false unity that compromises essentials. But it is equally harmful to divide the Body of Christ over non-essentials. The challenge in either case is how do we speak the truth in love to one another.

With these challenges in mind, I would have us return to the place we started. In some respects it may be the "worst of times" as we witness the moral decline and the unraveling of our culture. But it may

also be a time of tremendous opportunity for the Gospel. For along with the open hostility we see throughout our culture, there is also a longing for answers, for truth, for righteousness, for salvation. As David Wells has noted,

This yearning for what is spiritual amidst our secular wasteland is surely testimony to the fact that, as Augustine put it, we were formed by God and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him....

The truth is that the fields have never been so ready for harvesting. Our culture has never been riper to hear a Word about God [that is] large enough to provide meaning rooted in His own transcendent character, and forgiveness which is objective because of Christ's cross. Without knowing why, many today ache for such things. This is no time [Wells continues] for the evangelical world to lose its nerve. It is a time to recover a faith strong and virile enough to offer our culture the alternative which it needs to hear.¹¹

What is the most important thing that we can do as evangelical publishers? To paraphrase my opening statement it is: (1) to communicate the vision we share; (2) to encourage commitment to that vision; and (3) to provide resources for carrying out the vision--for insofar as this vision is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ it is the power of God unto salvation, and the only sufficient answer for the crisis of our day.

NOTES

1. David F. Wells, "Our Dying Culture," in *The Formal Papers of The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals' Summit* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 1996), 1.
2. Statistics included here are from William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) as summarized in Wells, pp. 1, 2.
3. See Bennett, pp. 46, 47 and 64.
4. "Partial Birth" abortion is "a late-term abortion in which the baby is extracted from the womb feet first, scissors are forced into the back of the skull, a suction catheter is inserted, and the baby's brains are sucked out." Cal Thomas, "Feel Their Pain," *World*, April 13, 1996, p. 17. Despite the brutal cruelty of partial birth abortion, President Clinton has vetoed legislation that would ban the practice, thereby perpetuating the practice.
5. See F. Lynne Bachleda, "Life and Death Matter," *Publishers Weekly*, April 8, 1996, pp. 34-36 for a survey of books on near death experiences, spirituality and angels.
6. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Truths of God's Word: Contending for the Truth in an Age of Anti-Truth," in *The Formal Papers . . .*, pp. 2, 3.
7. The four characteristics identified here seem to be those that are most widely accepted as the essential characteristics of evangelicalism. The way these are defined here draws especially from Lyman A. Kellstedt and John C. Green, "The Measure of Evangelicals," *Books and Culture*, Jan.-Feb. 1996, pp. 14, 15; Mark A. Knoll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 7-10; and Lane T. Dennis, *Conversion in an Evangelical Context: A Study in the Micro-Sociology of Religion* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1980), pp. 164-178.
8. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).
9. Gene Edward Veith, "The Truths of God's Word," in *The Formal Papers . . .*, p. 2.
10. This point (on the accommodation of the Gospel) is made clearly in the following two quotes. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. notes: "The modern worldview suggests a message of secular salvation through self-improvement, self-denial, self-gratification, self-empowerment, and self-consciousness. The Bible reveals that salvation is all of grace, and made possible and actual by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, who died as our substitute and propitiation our sin." In a similar vein, Michael S. Horton notes that Christ is often presented today "chiefly as the Divine Therapist, Guide, Lover, Hero, Power-Source, Political Reformer, Healer, Coach, or anything else other than the Mediator between God and the wicked. . . ." See Mohler, "The Truths of God's Word," in *The Formal Papers . . .* p. 12, and Horton, "Repentance, Recovery and Confession," in *The Formal Papers . . .*, p. 20.
11. Wells, "Our Dying Culture," p. 19.