

CAPITALISM, WORLDLINESS AND THEOLOGY

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Why do I believe, very passionately, that every Christian who is capable of understanding them should read Dr David F Wells's four books, *No Place for Truth*, *God in the Wasteland*, *Losing Our Virtue* and *Above All Earthly Powers*? These have now been joined by a fifth, *The Courage to be Protestant*, which is meant to be a simpler introduction to the themes of the first four, a response to the not infrequent assessment that the first four are, 'hard going'.

As someone who is not used to reading sociological or psychological texts I, too, find these books hard going but have found that they more than repay whatever effort is required. In nearly 40 years of reading Christian literature I have found nothing else that has been more helpful both to me personally and for an analysis of the times in which we live. Repetition helps. Reading them on holiday, free from other distractions, helps enormously. If I am certain of anything it is that in this paper I am unlikely to do Wells justice. What I hope is that I do not do him an injustice!

Out of a number of themes Wells blends together I have chosen what I think are the major three – Capitalism, Worldliness and Theology. The first two are major components of the problem, while the last, as defined and understood by Wells, is the answer.

What does Wells do in these books that is so special? He delineates and traces the outworking of Enlightenment ideas in both high and popular culture, showing that the Enlightenment assumption that God, rather than being necessary and relevant to human progress and well-being, is in fact an impediment to it, has established itself as the unquestioned presupposition from which modern thought and behaviour proceeds. He then shows how this, feeding and feeding off urbanisation, globalisation and technology, shapes a homogenous world in which God, convictions based on his self-revelation in scripture and true Christian virtue have absolutely no place in the public square.

What is the consequence of this for Christians and Christian Churches? We should make no mistake about it; the forces creating and shaping the modern world are extremely powerful. Even communism, with all the resources of powerful states at its command, is unable to resist them. It is inevitable therefore that the individual Christian will be impacted by them as he daily moves in this world in order to make a living, is entertained and educated by it and does the many other things that make up general engagement in life.

Entire Churches, indeed whole swathes of what calls itself evangelicalism, are being shaped not by the Word of God and the actions of his Spirit, but by these powerful forces as well. Wells shows, in *God in the Wasteland* in particular, that, in the effort to recapture lost social status by gaining dominant market share, the identity of many Churches is now derived from and their agendas driven by the marketing methods employed so successfully by the major corporations of the world. If this were simply an employment of more efficient methods there would be no problem, but it is not just

that. It is embracing a whole worldview and in the process becoming a friend of the world. Thus evangelical Churches become (have become in many instances) enemies of God.

What has happened within Churches to allow this situation to arise and what should Churches be doing? Wells's answer is that the church has stopped doing, and needs to get back to, theology. I will come to Wells's definition of theology towards the end of this paper. I think if these books offered no more than Wells's vision of theology, what it consists of, who should be doing it and the difference it should make, they would far more than justify their existence.

Before looking at these three themes in more detail I want to give a list of the various areas of thought and life that Wells deals with, to give a more complete picture of the books' contents and show why I think this series is extremely helpful when it comes to understanding and living in our world:

1. They serve as a reminder to us of the changes that have come over our world as a result of the conquest of capitalism. Taking the long view, they relativise the present, something that Christians need to do but something that is very difficult for people living in the present to do.

I want to make one thing clear at this point: Wells is not simply indulging nostalgia. Capitalism has transformed the world materially and, as far as material things are concerned, massively for the better. From a material point of view, I would rather live now than 200, 100 or even 50 years ago. Health in general is better, nutrition is better, standards of housing are better, cars are more reliable, communication is easier – the list of reasons one could give is virtually endless. ***Wells acknowledges and appreciates all of this.*** But alongside material progress has gone a kind of inner decay, a change in people's own understanding of themselves, their own identity and significance. At the same time as capitalism has given so much it has required life to be urbanised, globalised and reorganised in a wholly impersonal way. This has left people feeling emptied out, worthless and insignificant.

2. Christian Churches have not been unaffected by these changes. Along with other religions they have been relativised and socially marginalized. That which is distinctly Christian certainly has its place in contemporary society, but it is a private place. The most recent high-profile example of this in the UK is the furore caused by Michael Reiss's suggestion that, if pupils raised creationism in science lessons, the issues raised should be discussed there and then, in that same science lesson, with the discussion led by the science teacher. At the time this suggestion achieved publicity (he had said it previously, but it had gone largely unnoticed, apparently) he was the Director of Education for the Royal Society, Britain's most eminent scientific body.

If you google Michael Reiss and look at the responses to his suggestion you will see that this, from Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics and head of the Biology department at UCL, writing in on September 13, 2008 in *The Sun*, is typical:

Professor Michael Reiss thinks that both views should be presented to pupils in biology lessons and that there should be a “genuine discussion” about which is right.

To me that is nonsense. (It is also a lie to say that this is what Reiss said – IJ)

It is like me starting a university lecture on genetics and inheritance by discussing the theory that babies are brought by storks, which, as all Sun readers know, is unlikely to be correct.

By all means, tell the Biblical or Koranic story in a religious education class, but let it stay within those four walls where it belongs. (Emphasis mine)

3. The problem for us is that this is not how it used to be, neither is it how we feel it should be – so how should Churches react?

For many, the answer is to *adapt*. This involves defining success in modern terms, using **measurable** criteria, *ie* numbers, and pursuing the kinds of strategies that lead to measurable success. In other words, to recognise that we are in a marketplace, fighting for market share and that we need to emulate the methods employed by the worlds of business and entertainment in their relentless pursuit of increasing market share.

4. In response to this, Wells:
 - a. Shows how the modern world has arisen and what living in it consists of (possible aside at this point – this is the world the majority of your Church members and the people you want to reach are living in, probably more so than you are);
 - b. Traces how secular humanism has come to dominate the public square, diminishing the individual and privatizing the Christian faith along the way;
 - c. Explains the role of the enlightenment in this process;
 - d. Shows how this transition has impacted in many cases on the role of Christian leaders and the qualities they are now expected to display;
 - e. Makes the point that culture is not neutral and shows how adopting its mores is nothing less than active participation in the death of Christianity;
 - f. Asserts that the proper place for doing theology is the Church, not in the academy cut loose from the Church (the role of the academy is to fine tune theology);
 - g. Gives the best definition of theology that I’ve ever read;
 - h. Deals with the Biblical concept of the world;
 - i. Analyses why Christian leaders and Churches find functioning in the world’s way so attractive (*ie*, because it appears to be a route back to the status Christian leaders and Christian Churches once enjoyed);
 - j. Calls for a new anthropology and a new theology, neither of which are really new;
 - k. Reminds us that the Church was born into a pluralistic multicultural society, very much like ours is today, and shows, from history, that the Church made progress and ultimately triumphed in many areas by

confrontation, not accommodation and compromise (incidentally, Wells, an African by birth and a frequent traveler to Africa, thinks we see this today in Africa, no longer in the West);

- l. Reminds us that in this fallen world the most important things are moral things not therapeutic things. That what we do and why we do it, judged by God's standards, is more important than how we feel;
- m. Puts the present into its overall historical context, thus relativising it and making it a lot less impressive than it appears to those who know of nothing else;
- n. In the last of the four books, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, and in, *The Courage to be Protestant*, aims his analysis and critique at postmodernism as well as at the marketers. (I am going to deal more with Wells's critique of the marketers because:
 - i. I feel more qualified myself in that area, as a result of my personal history and experience;
 - ii. I think it is this strand that reformed Churches in the UK are currently more likely to emulate. The emergent Church I think is more likely to be copied by Charismatics and non-evangelicals, although I stand to be corrected, of course.)
- o. Helps us to understand the phenomenon often labelled, 'spirituality'.
- p. *And so much more!*

Well, there's enough there to keep us occupied for a lot longer than the next hour or so, so let's get started. The problem, of course, is, *where do you start?*

(Up to this point, I have summarised Wells's positions and thoughts in my own words. Going forward, I will quote extensively from Wells in order not just to state his thoughts but to give you a flavour of the books, hoping that will encourage you all to rush out and buy them!)

Wells starts in Wenham, Massachusetts, now part of Boston but originally a distinct settlement named after the village near Ipswich, Suffolk from which its founders came. To a large extent, before the coming of the road, the car the telegraph and the railway, communities were isolated and the majority of those who were born in them probably married in them and ultimately died in them. In between birth and death, very few traveled far. People thought of themselves, not without pride, as being people of a particular place.

People from a town like Wenham had an understanding of themselves that was largely shaped by orthodox (in the main, Congregational) Christianity and sustained by constant ties to family and craft.

There is debate among historians about when, in the West, the modern era began. Wells acknowledges that the date one chooses tends to be influenced by the definition of modern that is applied. He places the transition in the third quarter of the nineteenth century but says that the full shape was not apparent until the early part of the twentieth. Whenever it happened, and it obviously didn't work itself out at the same time everywhere, the world became a different place.

Wells labels the current era, *Our Time* (capital, 'O', capital 'T'). The era that preceded it is the Age of the West. **READ** NPFT 53-end of 1st para, 55:

Lying between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of our own century is a historical divide. On the one side is the Age of the West and on the other is an Age yet to be named. We know it already, however, for it is Our Time. On the other side of this divide, Europe was at the center politically and economically. On our side of the divide, the center is America. On the other side of the divide, Judeo-Christian values were central to Western culture, even if they were not always believed personally. On our side of the divide, such values have been dislodged and replaced with a loose set of psychological attitudes that we now know as modernity.

A new civilization is, in fact, arising, and these changes are the markers along the road to its ascendancy. Unlike the kingdoms and empires of the past, it is not centered in a particular people or rooted in a particular place on earth. It is not political in nature. The soil in which this civilization flourishes is that which democracy and capitalism produce, to be sure, and it depends for its survival on technology and urbanization. But where these are present, it is able to transcend boundaries and place, languages and customs, for it is carried by democracy and capitalism, technology and cities, and these are all rapidly becoming universal phenomena. They are the Esperanto of the modern world, the language that belongs to everyone because it belongs to no one in particular.

And what is even more remarkable is that this civilization is not arising from the ashes of another, at least not deliberately. Behind it lies no conqueror; beneath it lie none of the crushed bones on which other civilizations and empires have rested; and within it the ligaments of power are not held by any particular ruler or dictator. This civilization has conquered silently, painlessly. It is thus the most benign civilization ever to have dawned. And yet, despite its many oddities, it has all of the marks of a new civilization, as clearly differentiated from what preceded it as were the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and the Greek from what preceded them. What is now dawning, what is now intruding upon the world and beginning to forge links between peoples who do not share the same languages, ethnicity, religion or social customs, is modernity.

The mechanisms described by Wells owe their weight and ability to influence to the Enlightenment, which, Wells says, *...liberated us to dream dreams of the world's renovation and of ourselves at its centre, standing erect and proud, recasting the whole sorry scheme of things bare-handed, as it were, leaning only on our own reason and goodness. It also liberated us to perceive illusion as reality. The illusion was that the forces at work within human life were benign...life was bound and moved by the hidden purposes of an impersonal Good that would, in the end, serve only the high purposes the Enlightenment had imagined.*

The real outcome of the Enlightenment, however, has not been the preservation of noble values but their collapse into complete relativism...

Although the brazen promises of the Enlightenment about the possibility of remaking all of life are now dead, the premise on which they were built – freedom from God, freedom from authority, freedom from the past, freedom from evil – simply refuses to

die. It is what gives strength to the illusion that life can be remade. And it is this illusion that both feeds and feeds off the idea of progress...illusions have a way of making short work of reality.

...the illusions of progress that went hand in hand with these ideologies have managed to live on despite the fact that the ideologies themselves are now hiding in embarrassment or have already passed onto the junk heap of history. NPFT, 58f

For Wells the Enlightenment ideas (with the possible exception of Darwinism) have ceased to be dominant but he notes this significant development, *...just as the modern world was dying in its intellectual sense (around the third quarter of the 19th century), it was being born in its sociological form.*

So, the modern context is the illusion of universal progress free of all accountability to anything other than our own psychological well-being. This creates an environment in which God is held not to be needed, to be of no practical consequence to a life that requires instead only technology and technique. It becomes legitimate therefore for God to be confined to the private sphere.

Wells has much more to say about how this transition to Our Time has worked out in terms of dis-ease, violence, architecture and many other areas. He also explains how it this form of modernity, particularly the illusion of universal progress, requires us to speak of ourselves as post-modern and post-a whole host of other things. But time is not on our side.

INDIVIDUALISM AND CONFORMITY

The relationship between individualism and conformity in the American psyche in particular is a subject that gets two complete chapters covering 80 pages in NPFT. A very important topic, therefore.

Fortunately, for me at least, on page 56 and 57 of GITW, Wells sums up those 80 pages in NPFT: *I have argued elsewhere that the uniqueness of the American character lies in the way in which it manages to mix individualism and conformity (footnote referencing NPFT pp 137-217). Neither of these traits by itself is uniquely American. It is the way they are combined in America that is unique. In other countries – Britain, for example – the impulses toward individualism and conformity tend to offset or balance each other, but in America each impulse typically comes to the full expression in its own right, related to but not diminished by the other. The two impulses are naturally contradictory, but American culture has tended to resolve the tension between them by diverting the stream of individualism into private life and the stream of conformity into public life. Thus it is that in the public sphere Americans are uncomfortable with the unconventional and yearn for consensus, whereas in the private sphere they prize the personal vision, the strength and willingness to live by one's own lights regardless of what others think and what the conventions dictate.*

This combination of traits has created soil uncommonly fertile to worldliness and uncommonly inhospitable to the church. To change the image, the modern cultural context is like a pair of powerful pincers locked on the church, in some cases squeezing its identity as the people of God (emphasis Wells) beyond recognition.

How exactly does worldliness infiltrate the church through these deep and seemingly natural inclinations towards individualism and conformity? On the one side, modern individualism has been reduced to a technique for adjusting a personal image to what seems valued, admired and desired in society. This adaptation to cultural norms and expectations is precisely the mechanism by which worldliness takes root. On the other side, the need to conform – the sense of being ill-at-ease when one is at odds with the public perception of what is normal and normative – makes it extremely difficult for the Church to preserve its distinctive identity, to be different. This combination of a desire to be like admired people and a discomfort in being unlike them goes a long way toward explaining how it is that the church has found it so hard to recognize worldliness and even harder to dislodge it. Indeed, without a powerful theological vision as its antithesis, these cultural currents are impossible to resist.

Whether or not Wells description of this as a uniquely American way of reconciling these two tendencies was true in 1993 & 4, when NPFT and GITW were published, I think that it has become something that we are all now familiar with, at least in the UK. The recent Max Moseley judgment and its aftermath, in which Moseley's right to privacy when it came to sexual perversions was upheld as overriding the public interest in knowing what someone in his position does in private, in other words knowing about Moseley's *character*, is an example of this.

At what is arguably a level that has little or no public interest, we need to note that this is the world that today's Christians move in. A world in which it is much harder for Christians to bring their Christianity into the public sphere than it used to be, even in my relatively short Christian experience.

The above somewhat extensive quotation from Wells introduces the two themes that I want to look at in the remainder of the time available, worldliness and theology. Worldliness first, because it relates to the problem. Then, theology, because it is the answer.

WORLDLINESS

This topic gets a whole chapter in GITW, 24 pages.

Wells introduces this topic in GITW. Pp35f: *It is ironic that there are those in the church who view culture as mostly neutral and mostly harmless, even though they have a compelling Christian reason to think otherwise, while there are those in society who recognize that culture is laden with values, many of which are injurious to human well-being, even though they have no compelling religious or ideological reason to come to this conclusion. Surely a parable could be constructed out of this strange situation, one that might end with the words, ...the sons of this world are wiser in their generation than the sons of light (Lk 16:8). The church may choose to disregard many of today's cultural critics who are raising the alarms about the drift of Western culture and its internal rottenness – indeed, it is precisely doing so – but it does not have the luxury of disregarding what scripture says about our world. And today, what scripture says about the, world, and what those critics are seeing in contemporary culture are sometimes remarkably close.*

The, world, is the biblical way of speaking of the cultural ethos, the social arrangements, the habits of life that follow upon the corrupting of human nature. It is,

of course, true that human nature retains the divine image after the fall, just as the physical creation retains its goodness despite the fall, but the disordering of life following the fall is both individual and collective, with the latter giving plausibility to the former and the former fuelling the latter. In the current Western context, the plausibility of unbelief arises very significantly from modernity (footnote referencing NPFT, 53-94). In many ways, modernity is the contemporary realization of what the biblical authors had in mind when they spoke of the world – a reality that is by no means innocent, neutral or harmless.

The term, *world*, is used in 3 senses in the New Testament:

1. The earth, the created order;
2. The nations, the human community;
3. The ways of fallen humanity, alienated from God and his truth.

It is obviously the third sense of the term that interests us. Wells says that it is worthy of note that this sense of the term signifies not a sociological reality but a theological reality. The disappearance of theology from the life of the local Church is probably the reason, Wells thinks, why worldliness is being missed or misjudged in the evangelical church today. It takes theological sense, or sensitivity, to recognise it. Theology is precisely what is missing from many evangelical Churches today. The result of this is that marketing the church, adapting it to contemporary culture or inadvertently hitching it up to cultural trends are seen simply as matters of method. It is not appreciated that theological principles and issues of truth are at stake.

In the first two senses, Christians are, *In the world*, to use a familiar phrase that Wells takes as his heading. *The Church is clearly called to be thoroughly engaged with creation and with human life*, GITW, 39. When we pass to the third sense we are to be, ...*but not of it*.

In this third sense, *world*, is not only, *the collective refusal to bow before God, to receive his truth, to obey his commandments or to believe in his Christ*. It is also, ...*what fallen humanity uses as a substitute for God and his truth*.

Drawing principally on John's gospel and his first epistle, Wells traces the antithesis between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, freedom and bondage and life and death. *Thus there is a profound sense in which the church has to be, otherworldly. It carries within itself a discernibly different view of life from what passes as normal and normative in society. The church is defined by a knowledge that creates – or should create – an unbridgeable chasm between its own moral and spiritual values and those of the society. Christians are called to be exiles from the world (1 Pet 1:1; Heb 11:13), however personally painful that exile may be. They are supposed to be aliens to the world's darkness (1 Pet 2:11) as they seek another city, whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:10).* (GITW, 41)

The ways in which, *light*, for example can sometimes mean revealed truth and at other times right moral thinking and conduct shows the connection between truth and life. Wells acknowledges that he is speaking in dualistic terms but the distinctiveness of this Biblical dualism is that it does not hold all matter to be evil, all spirituality in human experience to be good. ...*it holds that good and evil are co-extensive throughout all of creation, locked in a battle the outcome of which is already known*

but the outworkings of which are still painfully slow in their development. It is a dualism between, this present age, and, the age to come, and the New Testament tells us that the latter has intruded on the former (Rom 12:2; ! Cor 1:20; 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:4; Eph 2:2; Tit 2:12). That is to say the dualism is eschatological and it must work itself out in ways that are trenchantly moral and intellectual. This has profound implications for the relationship between Christian faith and culture.

Wells then contrasts the way the New Testament juxtaposes chronologically this age and the age to come with the way the same thing is done in the Old Testament. From reading the Old Testament one gets the impression that the new age would follow on that which preceded it. In the New Testament, the two overlap. This age still exists. Satan is its God. We live alongside it, Titus 2:12, but we are delivered from it, Gal 1:4, and are not to be conformed to it, Romans 12:2. We have been called, effectually, out of darkness into light. Though we still live in and are surrounded by this age we are torn loose from this age in order that we might know and serve God.

Wells then turns to a consideration of some of the particular ways that these two ages come to expression. Christian God-centredness contrasts, for example, with journalistic man-centredness. Man-centredness narrows its perception to what is natural, God centredness frames what is natural with what is supernatural. One is wholly reliant on the senses, the other allows what the senses glean to be informed by the transcendent. One indiscriminately celebrates diversity, the other seeks to understand life's diversity in light of its unity. And so on and so on...

These choices are bleak and unqualified because, behind them, there is nothing that people trust in in a way that assures them that what they are doing is right or will produce human benefit. *Their naïve faith in inevitable progress has been torpedoed by the brutality and the manifold frustrations of the twentieth century.* We celebrate advances in knowledge and scientific discoveries, fearing at the same time the power that that knowledge and those discoveries might give to certain individuals and how they might use that power. Wells traces how this has worked itself out in architecture, in art and in entertainment and popular culture, devoting a whole paragraph to Madonna along the way!

He ends with John's warning – to the Christians of his day – that they should keep themselves from idols. This becomes the cue for the next section, which Wells concludes with, *Christian faith made relevant to the, world, in this third and final sense, will be Christian faith no longer relevant to God, to his Christ, to his truth.*

I intended, at this point, to turn to GITW Ch 5, *The Weightlessness of God* in which Wells shows how, first in estimate of popular culture and then of high culture, God has ceased to have anything of importance to say. That this has happened at both social levels, although by a more self-conscious and reflective path in high culture, is evidence for Wells that modernity produces the same result wherever it holds sway.

However, I think it is important that we get to what Wells sees as the answer to the current situation and what is lacking from much of evangelicalism today.

THEOLOGY

Modernity has displaced Theology from its former role as a unifying principle, dominating how people thought of themselves and other things and distinguished between right and wrong, recognizing that God is transcendent as well as immanent. This displacement of theology from its proper place in the church came into focus in an exchange between Wells and a Gordon Conwell seminarian.

Following the customary introductory session at the beginning of one of Wells's theological courses a group of students gathered round him. One of them thanked him for his introduction and the efforts Wells had made to show that he understood how, at the outset of his course, some students felt. As well as feeling petrified this particular student was having a crisis of conscience – was it right for him to spend so much money on a course in theology, given his ultimate desire of entering local Church ministry?! That, Wells writes, is the day he decided that he had to write this book.

Perhaps it would be truer to say that was the day he decided he had to write *a* book because the book he originally intended to write was, *a modest introduction for a small audience, perhaps entitled, A Little Encouragement for Young Theologians, a little offering designed to get students launched into orbit.*

What has emerged is anything but little (and probably not very encouraging for young theologians). (318 pp, Selected Bibliography – 13pp! 282 titles!) Why this change? Because as Wells reflected on the issues, aided by opportunities to lecture, discuss and debate, he experienced deepening convictions about the nature of theology, its proper audience and the principles of its construction. These books principally address the audience and *how the condition of the audience affects the very possibility of any theology being done at all.* Hence the sociological analysis that we have already considered.

For Wells, the answer is two-fold:

1. We have to get back to doing theology. That means ceasing to be modern and socially conformist because modern people, as described, are only interested in therapy. They cannot do theology;
2. Recognising that the proper sphere of theology is the church, not the academy. The academy's role is fine-tuning the theology that arises from genuine Christian experience, reflection and morality.

These books are intended to say only very little about the confessional content of theology, much more about the doing of it. But they are a call for the church to recover the practice of theology that consists of confession, reflection and virtue (the latter element is especially dealt with in, *Losing our Virtue*, a title I have not had time to look at really).

The theology and the understanding of the world around us that is derived from it is not new. NPFT's final chapter, *The Reform of Evangelicalism*, is described in the introduction as, *a plea for a new kind of evangelicalism, one that is much more like the old kind used to be.*

The preceding chapter, *The Habits of God* contrasts the contemporary evangelical world and the world in biblical times. It contrasts also the church of which we read in the New Testament and Churches with which we may be familiar. **READ** NPFT 259f: *The prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New in fact take the modern breath away, for they had a certainty about the existence, character and purposes of God – a certainty about his truth – that seems to have faded in the bright light of the modern world. They were convinced that God’s revelation, of which they were the vehicles and custodians, was true. True in an absolute sense. It was not merely true to them; it was not merely true in their time; it was not true approximately. What God had given was true universally, absolutely and enduringly.*

Today that sounds jarring and improbable.

Opposition to early Christian certainty takes many forms but they involve three presuppositions:

1. The human spirit has progressed in such a way that what is culturally older is of less value;
2. Worldviews are wed to the psychology of a particular age. No one today can slip back into an ancient worldview and make it their own;
3. Today’s unprecedented religious pluralism makes the former certainty look intellectually simplistic.

Wells has a response to each of these assumptions. I want to note just the first NPFT 261, *These are not small matters. They deserve far more consideration than I can offer here. But, on the first point, it should at least be noted that those who can sustain a faith in progress in the human spirit of this magnitude in the midst of the most brutal and destructive century in history are capable of a credulity that far exceeds the belief required for thinking that God has given a truth that is final and enduring.*

P263 *...while religious pluralism may be a novel experience for us, it is putting us in touch with the world that surrounded the Biblical writers probably more directly than any other. 264 The transition, then, from the way in which the biblical authors thought about their world, with all of its religious pluralism, to how we should think about ours, with all its competing religious claims, is shorter, less complex and easier than it has been in centuries. Indeed, it involves no transition at all, despite our modernity, for religiously our world looks remarkably like theirs.*

In GITW, pp113ff, Wells asks how we recover the saliency of God. His assertion is that the recovery of the Biblical doctrine of God has to be a part of that but that on its own it will not be enough. Modern evangelicals will not deny what can be shown to be a part of the biblical doctrine of God, the problem is that we do not grasp the *importance* of it. How can we do *that?* therefore becomes the question.

Wells’s answer is that we need to attend to two issues at the same time – Our Time’s prevailing anthropology and Our Time’s prevailing theology. The remainder of GITW is dedicated in the main to our theology.

So, for Wells the answer is a return to the doing of theology, but we need to consider precisely what he means by that, lest we run away with the idea that all we need to do is deliver learned lectures on a weekly basis.

NPFT, p5 he defines theology as something distinct from, *simply a philosophical reflection about the nature of things... (it) is rather the cogent articulation of the knowledge of God.* It exists for and in the Church. It exists in the academy as well, of course, but for Wells the role of the academy is that of fine tuning, no more.

A fuller definition, and one that excites me, I must confess, is given on p98 and fleshed out on the pages that follow. Having stated his conviction that, *...theology should mean the same thing regardless of whether it is used in the Church or in the academy,* he observes that, *In the past the doing of theology encompassed three essential aspects in both the Church and the academy: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements.*

Confession... is what the Church believes. It is what crystallizes into doctrine. ...Churches with roots in the protestant reformation confess the truth that God has given to the Church through the inspired Word of God. ...this authoritative truth lies at the heart of Christian life and practice, for this is what it means to live under the authority of scripture...in this core of confession...the Church's identity is preserved through the ages...Without this knowledge it is bereft of what defines the Church as the people of God, bereft of the means of worship, sustenance, proclamation and service. Confession must be at the centre of every theology that wants to be seen as theologia, the knowledge of God, a knowledge given in and for the people of God. (p99)

NPFT pp99ff: *The second element of theology, reflection, involves the intellectual struggle to understand what it means to be the recipients of God's Word in this present world. It has to proceed down three distinct avenues. First, it must range over the whole of God's disclosure within Scripture, seeking to make the connections between the various parts of Scripture such that God's intent in so revealing his character, acts and will is made clear. It aims at a comprehensive understanding of what God has given so that his mind will begin to be replicated in the church's mind. Second, reflection must range over the past, seeking to gather from God's working in the Church the ballast that will steady it in the storms of the present. It is through this kind of reflective work that the spiritual riches of the past are gathered and the present is relativised. The present always needs to be deprived of its pretensions to being the most elevated moment in the story of the human spirit (or, as some charismatics would have it, the most dramatic), for this opens wide the door to pride and folly. Third, reflection must seek to understand the connections between what is confessed and what, in any given society, is taken as normative. This is crucial, for the ideas and assumptions of any age powerfully intrude on the church's mind. In the West, modernity has determined what is normative. In our particular context, then, we are called to see that the Church does not adapt its thinking to the horizons that modernity prescribes for it but rather that it brings to those horizons the powerful antidote of God's truth. It is not the Word of God but rather modernity that stands in need of being demythologized.*

The third element of theology involves the cultivation of those virtues that constitute a wisdom for life, the kind of wisdom in which Christian practice is built on the pillars of confession and surrounded by the scaffolding of reflection. And yet this formulation is too simple, for what I have in mind is a kind of spirituality that is now exceedingly rare – the type of spirituality that is centrally moral in its nature because God is centrally holy in his being, that sees Christian practice not primarily as a matter of technique but as a matter of truth, and that refuses to disjoin practice from thought or thought from practice. Only when this kind of spirituality is present does the sort of wisdom arise by which a person comes to know how to be Christian in any given set of circumstances.

To ask that the Church be thus theological may seem to be asking too much; clearly it is asking too much of the academy. We have come to this pass because for most people these three interests have been disengaged from one another. In the modern period, for example, confession in the sense of a profession about the objective truth of God and his self-disclosure in the space-time world has become most awkward in academia because of its continuing attachment to Enlightenment habits. It is often equally embarrassing in the larger social context because of the way in which modernity has reshaped our sense of what is proper. As a result, confession has either lost weight or disappeared entirely in academic theology. And once confession is lost, reflection is cut loose to find new pastures. Once it has lost its discipline in the Word of God, it finds its subject matter anywhere along a line that runs from Eastern spirituality to radical politics to feminist ideology to environmental concerns. Moreover, class interests then typically intervene and drive a wedge between Church and academy, and the upshot of this is that academic theological reflection, cut loose from both the responsibility of practice and the foundation of confession, is relegated to the small world of the specially interested whose internal conversation is mostly incomprehensible to those who are outside it. Theology, in a historic sense, therefore dies, because all that is left of it is reflection of a philosophical nature.

By a different route, the same thing has happened in the Church, the evangelical wing included. As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self. That being the case, the responsibility of seeking to be Christian in the modern world is then transformed into a search for what Farley calls "a technology of practice", for techniques with which to expand the Church and master the self that borrow mainly from business management and psychology. Thus it is that the pastor seeks to embody what modernity admires and to redefine what pastoral ministry now means in light of this culture's two most admired types, the manager and the psychologist. Where this modern "wisdom" comes to supplant confession in defining and disciplining what practice should mean, where reflection has been reduced simply to reflection upon the self, and where the hard work of relating the truth of God's Word to the processes of modern life has been abandoned, there once again theology has died and all that is left of it is an empty shell of what wisdom once used to be. It is this process of reduction – the reduction of the meaning of theology to reflection in the academy and to practice in the evangelical church – that is the theme of this chapter. Yet before we proceed further, it is important that we understand the novelty of this situation. In eviscerating theology in this way, by substituting for its defining, confessional centre, a new set of principles (if they can appropriately be

called that [elsewhere, Wells insists they are not principles, simply a recipe for success]), evangelicals are moving ever closer to the point at which they will no longer meaningfully to be able to speak of themselves as historic protestants.

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