



Why are so many modern Christians so gullible?

(A plea for a return to confessional standards that Christians may once again know what the church, and they, believe)

by Peter C. Glover

There is no question about it. We have got to stop thinking of liberals in the church as the nominal pew-fodder of long-declining Protestant denominations. These days, liberals come in all sorts of evangelical shapes and sizes too. Indeed, given the fractured nature and disparate teachings of the Protestant and evangelical churches¹ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our jumping-off point *ought* to be that these titles are today so devoid of meaning and cogent identity – by reason of the common abandonment of confessional standards – that they offer no real consensus catholic worldview² or sense of unity, either to their own members or to the surrounding culture.

Above all, what this has achieved is the loss of any semblance of that ‘oneness’ which the Bible itself *demands* (see Ephesians 4), rendering any talk of a comprehensive pattern of belief in a proper *biblical worldview* incomprehensible to both its own members and to non-believers alike, as well as, therefore, irrelevant in the world.

Why the label ‘Bible-believing’ is just not good enough

This is not to say that large numbers in the evangelical world do not labour to assert themselves as ‘Bible-believing’ (synonymous with what ‘evangelical’ *used* to mean). In practice, however, that title invariably reveals nothing more than an independently devised, often sectarian, privatized belief system, where ‘Bible-believing’ means ‘whatever I say it means’ and not what the historic consensus of the church has always said it means.³

The average evangelical believer today is simply ‘tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine’ (Eph. 4:14), clueless as to the consistent biblical pattern of belief held by them or their church, let alone within a creed which they could articulate. But with the current crisis of leadership in our pulpits, poor teaching has simply aided and abetted the inherent gullibility of individual evangelicals in matters doctrinal, with countless numbers now simply forced to rely increasingly on the ‘supplements’ on offer from the burgeoning parachurch industry, with its own variety of quick-fix answers.

The result is that we have an increasingly schismatic climate within Protestant evangelicalism, with leading commentators already hearing our movement's 'death rattle'.⁴ Commenting on the fact of the evangelical plunge into 'astounding theological illiteracy',⁵ David Wells notes that 'The heretics of old, one suspects, would be sick with envy if they knew of the easy pickings that can now be had in the church'.⁶ How right he is. It is as if we evangelicals have all taken to various lifeboats, only to drift in different directions on a sea of turbulent cultural waves and violent theological crosscurrents – wholly failing to notice our mother ship quietly slipping beneath the waves in the background.

But who helped to sink the ship?

For over one hundred years, between 1850 and 1950, the results of the relentless attack by the liberal enlightenment on the authority of the Bible led to countless 'Christian' cults springing up. The reason that Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and others could call themselves Christians at all was that they each could make the claim to being *the* 'Bible-believing' church. This has always been the way, as Peter pointed out, with those who 'untaught and unstable, twist [the Scriptures] to their own destruction' (2 Pet.3:16). This is *precisely* why Peter makes the point that the private interpretation of Scripture is taken *out of the hands of individuals* and placed in the hand of the consensus mind of the whole people of God, the historic church (2 Pet. 1:20), echoing the foundational teaching on the subject at Genesis 40:8.

In previous centuries the church could simply turn to its pattern of apostolic teaching, brought into more easily digestible form in the ecumenical confessions and creeds of the church catholic, to identify with ease whether some new teaching was the teaching of the true church or not. In this way the expansive, biblically-rooted ecumenical confessions of the church proved to be essential bulwarks guarding church 'oneness'. The Protestant Reformers themselves not only acknowledged this fully, but also laboured themselves to protect this same understanding for the sake of the church by restating eternal truths in expansive Reformation confessions as a *de facto* recognition of the *only* serious manner by which genuine unity could be achieved and meaningful.

Not for them the gushing shows of 'love' and vague claims to privatized 'Bible-believing' status, by which the Christian cults and the modern neo-evangelical churches now attract their members.⁷ Today, however, we find countless Protestant and evangelical groups attempting to pursue unity, not by the historic church and Reformation basis of detailed confessional standards, but by adopting the unqualified label 'Bible-believing'. This usually means a chiselled-down rump of what they believe are 'essentials' which relate to how we are justified, but which provide not a jot of information about the manner in which we are sanctified and grown to maturity – the main work! Whilst it would be folly to deny that some doctrines are more important than others, it would be equal folly to deny that Scripture nowhere provides for the church catholic to teach anything less than the '*form of doctrine* to which you have been delivered' (Rom. 6:17) and to 'hold fast that pattern of sound words which you have heard from me' (2 Tim. 1:13).

It is asserted plainly here that 'cheapened' pragmatic unities based on 'the essentials', or even (C.S. Lewis's) 'mere Christianity', or even on the footing of a vacuous 'Bible-believing' tag, not only possess *no* biblical mandate, but are actual impediments to the biblical vision for true unity. Added to this is the theological idiocy of those bringing their own personal (modern) shibboleths to the process as

‘badges of orthodoxy’ – such as the King James Only Version and (singing) Psalms-only sectarians who are only factionalizing the church still further.

Cult-like belief and practice invade the evangelical church, too

By the middle of the twentieth century, even though liberal modernism ran out of intellectual steam, such was the damage inflicted upon the Protestant psyche that confidence in the power of the Word of God no longer meant what it once did. As postmodernism came in, with its ‘whatever is true for you *is* true’ ethic, many perceived a ‘better chance’ for the Christian message. But just as the greater danger in world religions is the Hindu ‘all systems are true’ ethic (and *not*, as is widely perceived, the monotheistic Islamic system), so too the dangers of postmodernism proved just as deadly to the true gospel as modernism. With the rise of postmodernism, the scene was now set for a further dramatic fracturing of the church consensus, this time over decades rather than centuries.

With the barrier of confessionalism increasingly a thing of the past, many local churches have now been thrown back upon their ‘own understanding’. Some have bravely held out (and still do) for their confessional standards. But they are a depressingly small number; with far more seemingly content to proceed on the non-articulating ‘Bible-believing’ banner, as if this were anything other than a postmodern expression, one which means whatever anyone wants it to mean. The result has been the loss of the ‘pattern of sound words’ delivered by the prophets and the apostles.

Perhaps we can see, in retrospect, just how easy we have made it for a whole *new* evangelicalism, with its private baggage of unbiblical beliefs and practices, to set up their market stalls within the precincts of the evangelical ‘temple’. And yet, if like Jesus we were to take a moment to know our own verbal ‘cord of knots’ by reference to our biblical and confessional standards, we could easily drive out the whole smorgasboard of the Word-Faith movement, seeker-sensitive man-focused worship, new prophetic revelation movements, and countless other non-biblical belief movements at a stroke.

A simplistic pipedream? Perhaps, but it *is* a thoroughly biblically-mandated one. One thing is certain. Without a return to confessional standards of belief and practice we can kiss goodbye to any serious prospect of achieving the only unity mandated by Scripture. And in such a climate, is it any wonder that the contemporary Christian, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is wandering around in something of a spiritual haze; not really *understanding* the full-orbed logicity of their faith; and completely at sea in terms of applying it to the real world? Is it any surprise that the world considers the modern church and the Christian as both theologically and culturally incoherent?

A plea for a return to confessionalism

When today we ask why Christians are making so many mistakes in gullibly accepting non-biblical beliefs and practices, the short answer is that, because so many are so badly taught by teachers who themselves have no concept of holding fast to the pattern of sound words delivered to them, they will look to anything which appears to be effectual (pragmatism). As a result many modern Christians have little or no idea what it means to be spiritual at all. They conceive of being spiritual as something esoteric, indefinable, pietistic and private. The Bible teaches no such spirituality. It defines true spirituality as, ‘draw[ing] near with a true heart’ (Heb. 10:22) to God and his Word. This is manifested by three marks: a) ‘holding fast the confession of our hope’ (v.23) – i.e. the internal receiving of the pattern of sound words;

b) 'consider[ing] one another in order to stir up good works' (v.24) – the practical outworking of our faith; and c) 'not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together' (v.25) – the much undervalued doctrine of church and all that it means biblically.

Note: only one of these is *internal* (genuine pietism as a Word-motivated heart and mind), while the other two are *external* – fully exposing the deficiencies of the modern evangelical mind and understanding concerning the importance of external, church '*catholic*' matters.

If there is to be any hope for the future of evangelicalism, we need to repent of the unbiblical privatization of faith by our cultural abandonment of the unifying confessional standards of faith. If we are to be able to reform the fractured body of Christ's church once again, then we must not leave the individual church members and individual churches floundering, fighting theological and cultural skirmishes in isolation, when the real battle *ought* to belong to the whole army – the church itself.

¹ 'Autonomous local franchises' would perhaps be a more accurate description.

² Unless stated to the contrary, 'catholic' here means 'universal' and not 'Roman Catholic'.

³ This is born out by the frightening results of recent surveys of Christian beliefs. In a survey by George Barna's evangelical research group in the USA, 26 per cent of all evangelicals believe that all religions are basically the same; 50 per cent of evangelicals believe that a life of good works will get people to heaven; and 35 per cent of 'born again' evangelicals do not believe Jesus ever rose physically from the dead. As the commenting article title made clear, this means that many evangelicals today are actually unbelievers. Statistics taken from 'Unbelieving "born-again": Research continues to reveal a steady theological collapse among professing Christians in America' by Gene Veith, *Word* magazine, 6 Dec. 2003, p. 33.

⁴ David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*: (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p.134.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.4.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.183.

⁷ Who in their right mind would *want* to join a cult? It is overt practical expressions of love and biblical fidelity which prove alluring.