

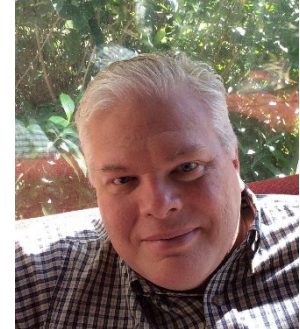
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Neo-Liberalism: The Liberal Ethos In Rick Warren's The Purpose Driven Church

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Recently I sat in on a discussion among several college students. A student from Kenya was talking with seven students from the United States. This Kenyan student contended that many Western missionaries in Africa were not very successful because they tried to convert Africans to Western culture as well as to Christianity.



“Traditional” missionaries in this Kenyan’s community had forbidden the use of drums in worship. The student felt it was a major mistake to fail to use such an important part of African culture for the honor and glory of God. One of the American students, who had done a short-term mission trip in Africa, pointed out that drums were used in animistic worship and should therefore not be included in Christian worship. Another American student asked his colleague a simple question, “What about the piano?” He followed up by pointing out that the piano had been used in American rock and roll culture to promote all sorts of ungodly behavior. On that basis, do we forbid the use of pianos in American worship?

As the discussion concluded, nothing had been resolved. Indeed, understanding the relationship between church and culture is no simple task. However, in listening to this enlightening conversation, I began to see where each student was coming from theologically. At the end of the day, practice and belief could not be separated. Behind each view in the discussion stood a working theology.

Often this theology was assumed but not thought out. As evangelicals debate the question of church and culture in America the same sort of things seems to be happening: all sides have a working theology, but most often it is assumed, even if not well thought out.

It seems to me that we can divide evangelicals into two groups: “Confessing Evangelicals” and “Neoliberal Evangelicals.” The goal of both groups is to practice the Christian faith as revealed in the New Testament. Confessing Evangelicals look at the early church through the lens of the Protestant Reformation. They tend to hold some

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substantial statement of faith which is binding on the worship and life of the church.¹ Neoliberal Evangelicals tend to trace their roots back to the early church through the lens of the Second Great Awakening in America. They tend to hold a very minimal statement of faith and emphasize experience and action over doctrine. Religious experience is the binding authority on these churches.

Liberalism is alive and well in many evangelical churches. It does not manifest itself as a direct assault on fundamental Christian doctrines. Rather it is a liberalism of practice. This practical liberalism is undermining historic evangelical doctrine.

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Confessional Evangelicals and Neoliberal Evangelicals approach the Christian faith differently. To see this clearly, compare the life and ministry of John Calvin with Charles Finney. These varied approaches to faith and life are manifesting themselves in a growing split within the evangelical community. Until the evangelical community can come to a greater consensus on major theological issues and approaches they will not be free from the kind of Protestant liberalism that struck in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America. Liberalism is alive and well in many evangelical churches. It does not manifest itself as a direct assault on fundamental Christian doctrines. Rather it is a liberalism of practice. This practical liberalism is undermining historic evangelical doctrine. Confessing Evangelicals must deal with Neoliberal Evangelicals because the very heart of the gospel is at stake.

Perhaps the outstanding and refined example of Neoliberalism is the “Church Growth Movement.” The Church Growth Movement is tempting to pastors because it offers “surefire” ways of getting people into church. It was tempting for me until I began to realize the fundamental incompatibility with my Reformed theological views. This article is born out of a troubled heart that is concerned about the future of my Neoliberal friends.

In the midst of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy earlier this century, J. Gresham Machen, at the time still at Princeton Theological Seminary, published his devastating critique of Modernism titled *Christianity and Liberalism*. George Marsden comments on the book’s impact:

¹ For instance, the *Westminster Confession*, *Belgic Confession*, *Augsburg Confession*, *39 Articles*, *Baptist Confession of London* (1689), etc.

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Even the secular liberal press, the natural ally of the liberal churchmen, was defecting. Within two weeks of the end of 1923 both *The Nation* and *The New Republic* published essays arguing that the fundamentalists had logic on their side when they invited the modernists to leave their denominations.²

This challenge to the liberals, who preferred the term “modernist,” needed a forceful response. It came in the form of Shailer Mathews’ treatise, *The Faith of Modernism*, released in 1924. Shailer Mathews was the highly respected dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School. His critique of “dogmatic Christianity,” of which Machen was a leading representative, argues along the same lines as many in the Church Growth Movement today do in their critique of “traditional Christianity.”

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Recently, Rick Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church, Orange County, California, released a landmark popular work in the Church Growth Movement titled *The Purpose Driven Church*. It has sold more than 270,000 copies according to Saddleback’s Web site, which is remarkable for a “niche” market book designed for pastors and church leaders. This in itself makes the number of copies sold quite remarkable.

The goal of this article is to demonstrate that Rick Warren is not saying anything new in his book. Representing American Protestant Liberalism, Shailer Mathews argued in the earlier part of this century along the same lines as Rick Warren. Modern evangelicals are dealing with the early stages of their own fundamentalist-modernist controversy. We will examine why as we take a closer look at Warren’s theology as expressed in *The Purpose Driven Church*.³ Using Mathews and Warren, I will compare the earlier Protestant liberalism with modern Neoliberalism.

² George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 175.

³ I realize that Warren might not “mean” to say what he said. I can deal only with what appears in print, not his intentions which I have no way of knowing. I also realize that Warren is but one voice in a larger movement. Judging from the sale of his book I consider him a very influential voice.

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SURFING ON GOD'S WAVES

What is church growth? For Warren it is “surfing” the wave of God’s Spirit.⁴ The goal of church leaders is to recognize the moving of the Spirit and ride it like a surfer rides waves, because the “more skilled we become in riding waves of growth, the more God sends!”⁵ The church can only participate in what God is doing. But one must ask the question: How do I recognize a “wave” of God’s Spirit? Is the wave I am riding one of redemption or one of judgment? How can I tell the difference between the two? Is it possible that some of the waves are waves of Satanic pseudoreligion? How can I tell the difference between true and false religion?

Warren exudes confidence in his own ability to discern God’s movement in modern American culture: “In this book, I’ll identify some of the principles and processes God is using to reach this generation for Christ... I *can* teach you how to recognize what God is doing, how to cooperate with what God is doing, and how to become more skilled in riding a wave of God’s blessing.”⁶ God is a social scientist, who, through methods revealed by Warren, is reaching the world for Christ.

For Shailer Mathews, modernism “is the use of the methods of modern science to find, state, and use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of a modern world.”⁷ The permanence of inherited orthodoxy is not its doctrines but its “values.” Science sets the agenda to which these “values” of orthodoxy must respond. Whatever form the church takes, it must reside within the bounds of the culture of the day.

For Mathews, knowing what God is doing involves cultural analysis. To understand how God works one must study the historic development of culture. Christianity’s “very history shows that it is an organized group belief, born of social forces, ministering to needs socially felt, conditioned by social habits, and using social and other patterns to express its fundamental and determining convictions.”⁸ In other words, Christianity as a religion is born of culture and lives in culture. God may be the father of the church, but culture is her mother. Unfortunately the god of modernism is a polygamist. God is real enough. But he can be found only within culture. To “tap” into culture is to tap into God.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 13–15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

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Warren proposes that we “tap” into God. He puts it in terms of riding spiritual waves. But the problem arises in knowing the *nature* of God’s movement within the culture. It is one thing to say that God is moving in our culture. It is quite another thing to interpret His movements. Are we really justified in having such an optimistic view of our ability as humans to interpret culture, especially our own? Warren can assure his readers that he can tell them exactly what God is doing and how he is doing it. But it seems to me that Warren interprets American culture from the viewpoint of his own subculture.

In *The Purpose Driven Church* Warren describes three responses that he sees to culture.⁹ The first is “imitation.” These churches seek to “blend” with culture. The culture they blend with is the culture of “radical feminism” and “liberal sexual standards.” The second is “isolation.” These churches are the “traditionalists” who won’t adapt to culture. What is commended is “infiltration,” which, by the way, is “the strategy of Jesus.” Jesus “walked among people, spoke *their* language, sang *their* songs, attended *their* parties, and used *their* current events ... to capture attention when he taught.”¹⁰ But did Jesus really infiltrate culture as Warren seems to imply? Is Warren simply looking for a “Jesus” in history that looks a lot like him?

Jesus did walk among the people and communicate with them. He was “sinner-sensitive” to put it in Warren’s terms. But it seems to me that talk of the “strategy of Jesus” is to simply lend divine authority to Warren’s own sub-cultural views. To this subculture radical feminism is blatantly “cultural.” Yet the radical feminists would probably accuse Warren of accommodating to a “radical patriarchal” culture. It is so easy to accuse those whose culture is radically different with selling out to culture. It seems much more difficult to recognize our own cultural accommodation.

A great danger in both Liberalism and Neoliberalism is a naive accommodation to culture. Any culture comprised largely of unbelieving men and women will challenge historic orthodoxy. Granting too much to culture jeopardizes orthodoxy. Warren says, “Fulfilling God’s purpose must always take priority over preserving tradition.”¹¹ He has already told us that he can see God’s purpose in culture dearly. Therefore, I wonder how much tradition Warren is willing to overthrow in order to fulfill God’s purposes. Can’t tradition be seen as the practical outworking of a community’s core doctrinal beliefs? Tradition doesn’t happen in a vacuum. People generally have reasons for what they do.

In light of these things, one can argue that a naive accommodation to culture “culturalizes” Christianity. In other words, Christianity in a cultural form is only relevant

⁹ Ibid., 235-38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 237. Emphasis in original [sic].

¹¹ Ibid., 238.

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to the culture it inhabits. Biblical tradition (cf. Titus 1:9, et. al.) serves as an anchor that keeps different cultures together. A Christianity that does not preserve this biblical tradition will, in the end, not be orthodox.

Historic orthodoxy poses a problem for Warren's view of culture. After all, who in present American culture wants to hear the apostolic doctrines of depravity, election, atonement, or perseverance? Who wants to deal with problematic events in redemptive history like Israel's conquest of Canaan? It seems as if Warren's solution to these problems is to narrow the scope of historic orthodoxy. In other words, he keeps his creed to a minimum. We will be exploring this in more detail later. For the time being, we may say his cultural optimism puts tremendous pressure on him to adjust his statement of faith. Some essentials suddenly become nonessentials. As nonessentials, these biblical teachings have no place in a statement of faith. It seems to me that the question is no longer, "Does the Bible teach it?" but "Can someone get to heaven without believing it?" By changing the nature of the question, the interpreter rather than the message becomes sovereign.

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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF MAN

Throughout the history of the church two religions have existed side by side. Both claim to be Christian. They share many of the same beliefs. Yet at heart they are very different. One describes the relationship between God and humanity as that of divine action and human response. The other describes the same relationship as one of human action and divine response. For many evangelicals this might seem like theological hair splitting. But for Christian leaders such as Augustine, Bradwardine, Luther, Calvin, and numerous others, something vital was at stake. That something was the heart of the gospel. We could put difference in the form of a question: Who is ultimately sovereign in salvation? The first religion says God. The second religion says man.

The success or failure of a church depends upon its ability to meet felt needs. The measure of success is built upon human response to what a particular church is doing to meet felt needs. Thus the desires of unbelievers drive a church and its presentation of the gospel.

Liberalism rejected biblical doctrines for the sake of cultural acceptance. After all, "religions spring from human needs."¹² We saw earlier that Mathews saw religion as

¹² Ibid., 2.

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culturally derived. He says further that “just because we are all human we turn for aid to God. We need Him for our support and comfort and guidance. To find Him we turn to that religion into which we have been born or to which we have been attracted.”¹³ The goal thus becomes making Christianity as attractive as possible to any given culture. The whims of the people decide the shape Christianity will take. Mathews is totally unwilling to concede that modernists are anything other than orthodox, evangelical Christians.¹⁴ He says, “Modernists as a class are evangelical Christians.”¹⁵ They are simply evangelical Christians “who use modern methods to meet modern needs.”¹⁶ Modern needs were an obsession of turn-of-the-century liberals such as Mathews. This sprang from their view of Christianity as a cultural construct derived from human needs.

Warren seems to view things in much the same manner. “A church will never grow beyond its capacity to meet needs.”¹⁷ Again the “strategy of Jesus” is invoked when Warren claims that “Jesus often established a beachhead for evangelism by meeting a felt need.”¹⁸ The success or failure of a church depends upon its ability to meet felt needs. The measure of success is built upon human response to what a particular church is doing to meet felt needs. Thus the desires of unbelievers drive a church and its presentation of the gospel. But this goes back to the action/response sequence mentioned earlier. In this model, human action elicits God’s response. It’s like the recent college graduate who takes a job in the mailroom “to get a foot in the door.” A church must use any “ethical” means possible to get people to put their “foot in the door” of the church in an action that will elicit God’s response. Greater things will follow. Warren expresses the sentiment this way: It doesn’t matter *why* people come to Jesus, what matters is *that* they come.”¹⁹

This attitude leads to a “science of religion.” People must be coaxed into coming to Jesus. With an anthropocentric view of salvation, marketing the church becomes a necessary thing. The church becomes a corporation with salvation as its main product. What we see in the Church Growth Movement is an outworking of its theology. The same thing can be seen in the methods of classic Protestant liberalism.

Shailer Mathews wrote, “Good will needs good social technique.”²⁰ Good will for Mathews is the essence of salvation. “The Christian movement ... has also preached good

¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Warren, 221.

¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁹ Ibid., 219. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Mathews, 149.

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will as a way to righteousness and the love of God as a basis for hope.”²¹ He also writes, “only right relations with God can save men into good will.”²² What we have in Mathews is the modernist belief that social techniques need to be used to bring men and women to salvation (i.e., good will). Much of the same attitude can be seen in Warren’s approach.

Rick Warren theorizes:

Imagine what would happen to a commercial radio station if it tried to appeal to everyone’s taste in music. A station that alternated its format between classical, heavy metal, country, rap, raggaee, and southern gospel would end up alienating everyone. No one would listen to that station! ... Successful radio stations select a target audience.²³

He thus reasons from commercial enterprise to Christian ministry, “For your church to be most effective in evangelism you must decide on a target.”²⁴ The audience must be surveyed as to their likes and dislikes so that an effective evangelism strategy can be put together. Ultimately, Warren is shaping his church to fit the needs of an audience who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18), and “who exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Is it a surprise that Warren concludes, “The Bible determines our message, but our target determines when, where, and how we communicate it.”²⁵ In the end the audience is sovereign. Their desires control the gospel.

A loss leader is a popular item sold in a store at a loss to get people into the store. Once in the store the manager hopes the customers will buy other items at a high mark-up. Seeker-sensitive services are the loss leaders of the Church Growth Movement. They are the tools to introduce people to the church hoping they will eventually buy the whole Christian package. Because the audience is sovereign the packaging of the church is most important. Thus demographics become crucial.

Rick Warren’s church, Saddleback Valley Community Church, has identified its target as “Saddleback Sam.” He is a middle-class, well-educated, materialistic skeptic of organized religion who happens to like contemporary music, health and fitness, and casual dress.²⁶ His church must then present herself in ways that make Saddleback Sam feel comfortable: casual and contemporary. Thus the shape of a church’s evangelism and worship is

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 98.

²³ Warren, 157.

²⁴ Ibid., 157.

²⁵ Ibid., 157.

²⁶ Ibid., 70.

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determined by sociological strategies discovered through extensive market research. On the surface this seems like “selling out” to culture. But I contend that this is simply a reflection of Warren’s theology. “Selling out” to culture is not the intent. Reaching people for Christ is. But is a person’s salvation really dependent upon us and our skills of persuasion? To what beliefs about God and man are they being converted? These are key questions to ask Warren and others in the Church Growth Movement.

Here we see Warren’s struggle between orthodoxy and liberalism. On the one hand, he wants to preserve historic orthodoxy. On the other hand, there is great pressure to be “palatable” to the culture. Having a minimal creed helps in this respect. But one is still confronted with the biblical witness. As an evangelical, Warren still has a high regard for the reliability and authority of the Bible. How does one justify the cultural approach? The answer is simple. Find it in the Bible. This is exactly what Warren does.

THE CHURCH GROWTH APOSTLES AND THEIR MASTER

Throughout the nineteenth century liberal scholars attempted to write “biographies” of the historical Jesus. As the Enlightenment swept through Europe and America, historical-critical approaches toward the Bible became more popular. These approaches assumed the gospels to be unreliable records of Jesus. Historical-critical scholars attempted to get behind the gospel to find the Jesus of history.²⁷ In his devastating critique of this approach found in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer concludes:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.²⁸

Schweitzer is saying that the “lives of Jesus” written by liberal scholars in the nineteenth century looked more like the authors than the Jesus of history. One might say that “Jesus” simply becomes a self-portrait of the scholar. Schweitzer is concerned that the Jesus offered to these people by liberal scholarship was “too small, because we had forced Him into conformity with our human standards and human psychology.”²⁹

²⁷ For an outstanding introduction to the “Lives of Jesus” movement see Robert Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995). This book is a “must read” for any pastor ministering in an academic community.

²⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. by W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1948). This work was originally published in German in 1906.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 400.

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Rick Warren seems to have his own “real Jesus.” We might call Him the “Church Growth Jesus.” This “Church Growth Jesus” has followers known as the “Church Growth Apostles.” Because Warren approaches the New Testament in much the same way as earlier scholars one finds that Jesus and the apostles commend everything he does.

Rick Warren seems to have his own “real Jesus.” We might call Him the “Church Growth Jesus.” This “Church Growth Jesus” has followers known as the “Church Growth Apostles.” Because Warren approaches the New Testament in much the same way as earlier scholars one finds that Jesus and the apostles commend everything he does. Thus, his opponents are not only criticizing him but Jesus and the apostles as well. One wonders if he is not creating Jesus and the apostles in his own image.

According to Warren the secret of effective evangelism is to use Jesus’ methodology.³⁰ He says,

When Jesus sent his disciples out on their first evangelistic campaign, he defined the target very specifically: They were to focus on their own countrymen. “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel’” (Matt. 10:5–6)... There may have been several reasons Jesus narrowed the target, but one thing is certain: He targeted the kind of people the disciples were most likely to reach—people like themselves. Jesus was not being prejudiced, he was being strategic.³¹

The Church Growth Jesus must take into account and plan His strategy according to man’s sovereignty. In this way, it appears that the Incarnate Word is no more sovereign than His Father in heaven.

Besides missing the redemptive-historical context of the passage he quotes, Warren seems to have other problems. He interprets this “sending of the Twelve” in terms of church growth methodology. Examples of this exist throughout his book. Over and over

³⁰ Warren, 186.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

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again Warren finds Jesus teaching church growth principles. Over and over again Warren seems to be finding things that haven't been found in passages in the history of the church. We are not talking about application but basic interpretation.

Something else is striking in the above example. The anthropocentric theology of Warren is clearly demonstrated. Jesus *must* target certain kinds of people and He *must* be strategic in His outreach plans. If it is true that God responds to human actions this makes sense. After all, one must find the people who are most likely to act if the response of God is the desired result. Here we see the sovereignty of man. The Church Growth Jesus must take into account and plan His strategy according to man's sovereignty. In this way, it appears that the Incarnate Word is no more sovereign than His Father in heaven.

Warren in many ways has "outgrown" the theological inheritance of the early church and the Reformation. This shows up in the way he exegetes biblical passages.

Furthermore, for Warren, this "church growth hermeneutic" is carried on to the apostles. Both Paul and Peter "targeted" their audience. "Paul targeted his ministry to the Gentiles, and Peter targeted his ministry to Jews."³² Paul and Peter are called upon to support Warren's homogeneous church principle. But did the apostolic church really organize itself this way, or was it more a matter of geography? Did not Paul usually begin his ministry in a new location at the local synagogue (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10; 18:4; et. al.)? Wasn't his title "Apostle to the Gentiles" more one of effect than simply desire (Rom. 9–11)? Wasn't it more the command of God rather than sociological principles that moved the apostles? Didn't Peter first go to the Gentiles at the command of God (Acts 10–11)? These are questions that Warren ought to answer if he claims to be a sound exegete of Scripture.

Because Warren has a high regard for the Bible he must find some justification for his theological opinions in its pages. One cannot help but wonder if his exegesis is not driven more by his theology and view of culture than by sound exegetical principles. It is here that the tension he feels between his historic orthodox doctrine and liberal practice comes to the forefront. In the end, Warren proves Mathews' contention that "Our theological inheritance is not false, but for many persons, outgrown."³³ Warren in many ways has "outgrown" the theological inheritance of the early church and the Reformation. This

³² Ibid., 158.

³³ Mathews, 108.

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shows up in the way he exegetes biblical passages. The dangerous consequence of Warren's hermeneutic is a fracturing of the church.

REBUILDING THE WALL

In reading the New Testament one gets the impression that the church is to break down barriers, not erect them. Philip brought the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8). Peter is commanded to go to the Gentiles with the gospel (Acts 10). These are the very two "people groups" Jesus didn't "target" because they were so unlike the disciples culturally and ethnically. Paul tells the Galatians that in Christ "There is neither Jew or Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). He tells the Ephesians that God has broken "down the barrier of the dividing wall" (2:14) between the Jews and Gentiles. James lectures Christians who made socio-economic distinctions in the church (2:1ff.).

Because of his theology, Warren must divide what the Apostles demonstrated and commanded should be put together. Apparently, Warren believes that someone *can't* expect to reach people effectively with a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Since Warren has already claimed to know exactly what God's methods are for reaching people for Christ, I suppose one must not critique his methods at this point. He is simply doing things "God's way" (even though "God's way" clearly contradicts His infallible Word).

In the end, Warren rebuilds the dividing wall that the gospel tears down. White folks and black folks, upper-class and lower-class folks, boosters, boomers and busters, due to cultural differences, have no hope of worshiping together. At best they can share a building. At worst they all worship in different places with little or nothing in common. Evangelicalism becomes a religion of subcultures.

THE RELEVANT CONFESSION

Shailer Mathews wrote, "Reality has grown so vast that the theological deliverances of a pre-scientific, monarchical age are unintelligible."³⁴ The twentieth century has seen an explosion in the social sciences much like the explosion of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. We look to psychologists and social engineers to tell us about ourselves and our culture. The social sciences are increasingly becoming a part of our societal fabric, so much so that one could argue that orthodox doctrine is unintelligible to this modern, social scientific world. Doctrines such as the Trinity, human depravity,

³⁴ Ibid., 107.

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substitutionary atonement and the like are all unintelligible to a world that thinks itself sophisticated in matters of human nature and culture.

Mathews takes a “God of the gaps” approach to religion. Religion fills in the gaps left by the human needs of each time:

Now most reality is given by science. The world of men and women has needs which must be scientifically understood. Religious convictions must be within the limits of such knowledge; our constructive patterns and organizing concepts will be drawn from those new needs and habits and knowledge which are creative in our day.³⁵

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As a modernist, Mathews seeks to conform a church’s religious convictions (i.e., confession) to the limits of the scientific knowledge of his day. Therefore, a religious conviction must be intelligible to a society before it can be adopted. When Paul told the Corinthians that the gospel was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23) he was speaking to a prescientific audience. Thus, we ought not think this passage applies in the same way today as it did to its early audience. It was simply Paul’s culturally derived expression that was meaningful to people at the time.

What Mathews ultimately argues for is a relevant confession that makes the center of Christianity ethical living not doctrinal truth. Because ethics marks the core of his Christian understanding he is not confessionally oriented by any means. But if one calls a statement of ultimate belief a confession, then Mathews has a very short one. Warren has a very short confession as well. The confessional language has been modified in several key points in an apparent attempt to make it easier for modern culture to understand. Structurally it looks like a statement of faith acceptable to the fundamentalists of the early part of this century. But the changes are very telling and they may be more harmful than Warren realizes.

First, Saddleback Valley Community Church has changed the traditional language defining the Trinity. No longer is it God who has eternally existed in three persons, but God who has “eternally existed in three *personalities*.”³⁶ This has the ring of a “psychological modalism.” Does God have multiple personalities? Doesn’t psychology see this as a disorder? Warren doesn’t make the case for the Trinity easier to understand by playing with traditional language. In many ways, he is creating more problems than he is solving.

³⁵ Ibid., 88.

³⁶ “What We Believe,” Saddleback Valley Community Church. Taken off the church’s internet Web site.

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Second, Saddleback's statement of faith has added *spiritual* to its understanding of man in God's image. Man is in the *spiritual* image of God.³⁷ Is this the language of Genesis 1–2? Does limiting man's image to the "spiritual" really explain the image of God? Is there not a hint of gnosticism in that statement?

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Third, the statement reduces sin to an attitude. Man is "marred by an attitude of disobedience toward God called sin."³⁸ Does this make salvation an "attitude adjustment"? Shailer Mathews explained the liberal's understanding of sin in similar terms:

...the Modernist looks upon sin as violation of the immanent divine will to good will and to progress towards that which is more personal, a conscious yielding, because of immediate pleasure, to the backward pull of outgrown needs; a violation of those personal forces both of God and human society which make progress possible. Human nature is not corrupt, but atavistic.³⁹

In other words, sin is a bad attitude toward progress. God wants us to have the right attitude toward progress. Sin is not having the attitude God wants us to have. Both Mathews and Warren take a reductionistic view of sin. If sin is simply an attitude, why don't Christians who have changed their attitude toward God live perfect lives? Scripture aside (the whole weight of Scripture is against this view), is this the reality of the life of any Christian? Once the attitude changes, does the sin really stop?

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³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Mathews, 97–98.

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as small and irrelevant ways.*

Ultimately, Warren not only reduces his creed but plays with the language of historic orthodoxy as well. Where does Warren's understanding of culture, anthropocentric soteriology, social scientific approach to missions, and "church growth" hermeneutic lead him? It leads him to adjust his creed in what he probably sees as small and irrelevant ways. But the early church once argued vigorously over one letter in defense of orthodox Christology.⁴⁰ Certainly, the distinction did not appear relevant to the lives of many people. But the early church saw the very fabric of faith at stake in the debate. Being relevant wasn't the issue. Being orthodox was. Orthodoxy meant faithfulness to the witness of Scripture.

When I was first married my wife told me, "Don't just tell me you love me, show me you love me." That meant picking up my clothes, doing dishes, and cleaning the bathroom among other things. Our practice inevitably reveals our core beliefs. Our true confession is made plain in our practice. This is why I'm skeptical that Neo-Liberal evangelicals can maintain the tension between orthodox belief and liberal practice. One or the other has to give. If the statement of faith of Saddleback Valley Community Church is any indication of the future of Neo-Liberal churches then one must sadly conclude that orthodox doctrine is in more jeopardy than liberal practice.

CONCLUSION

Shailer Mathews wrote,

Jesus cannot help men who refuse to take His teaching seriously. It is not enough to believe something about Him. Men must believe Him.... The Jesus of history was not a lawgiver. He was a teacher and poet. For this reason, we cannot treat His words as if they were prescriptions for our daily lives.⁴¹

On the one hand, we must believe Jesus. On the other hand, we mustn't take His teaching seriously because He was a "teacher and poet." It doesn't seem to me that Mathews' version of what Jesus taught is too difficult to take seriously: "Now the teachings of Jesus given us by a critical study of the gospels is exceedingly simple: God is love, and love is

⁴⁰ At this point it might be helpful if Neo-Liberals study the *homoousios/homoiusios* debate in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the early church. Justo Gonzalez's *History of Christian Thought, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), provides a readable summary of the debate.

⁴¹ Mathews, 146–47.

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the only practicable way of life.”⁴² In the end there is no Trinity, no fall, no atonement, and thus, no redemption other than our ability to love in this life. Is this the gospel the apostles thundered with power? Is this really all Jesus had to say to us? Can we really accept Mathews’ minimalist creed as the teaching of the Bible? While Warren has by no means gone as far as Mathews, one has to wonder where he, and the movement he is a part of is, heading.

Within evangelicalism there are many movements which make finding a precise definition of the beliefs of the movement quite difficult. The line between ancient heresy and ancient orthodoxy is often blurred. Most evangelicals have lost their Reformation heritage. The evangelicals who look toward ancient orthodoxy and a Reformation heritage are often laughed out of court as irrelevant to the needs of modern culture. Evangelicalism is a child of the Enlightenment which grew up in nineteenth-century America. Neo-Liberal Evangelicalism is a conservative form of cultural Protestantism. Therefore, contemporary culture, not historic orthodoxy, sets the agenda for these churches. Underlying this cultural Christianity is a view of religion that makes God respond to human actions. Thus the ministry of the church is to get people to act so that God will respond to them. In the end, human beings become sovereign. Everything must serve them. Adjustments must be made for them, even if the adjustments include abandoning basic truths of the apostolic faith of the church.

I do believe the term Neoliberal is a helpful term to describe most evangelicals in America. Neoliberalism is “not quite liberalism” just as neoorthodoxy was “not quite orthodoxy.” Neoliberals want to remain orthodox in doctrine, yet are pulled strongly to the kind of cultural Protestantism seen in classic Protestant liberalism.

I greatly fear that Neoliberal evangelicals such as Warren undermine the very faith they hold so dear. While they may remain orthodox to the end, they are setting the stage for a full-blown evangelical liberalism in later generations. I don’t make this charge lightly. I have read much of the material the church growth movement has to offer. I have used Rick Warren’s book and others like it in pastoral ministry. Lest anyone think I am the sort of person who takes pleasure in throwing stones, my own brother, whom I dearly love, is Director of Marketing and Programming for Warren’s church. Yet, my troubled heart compels me to write hoping that the Christian faith I have staked my eternal soul on will not be hidden in another “Dark Age” that will condemn millions of people to a form of godliness devoid of gospel truth.

⁴² Ibid., 47.

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⁴³ Accardy, C. (1998). "Neo-Liberalism: The Liberal Ethos in Rick Warren's the Purpose Driven Church." *Reformation and Revival*, 7(3), 94–118.