When the Word Goes to Neglect

> *For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,*
> — Hebrews 2:1–3 (NASB)

For a long time I have followed the work of George Barna, the Christian researcher who knew that there was something wrong when far, far above 50% of all Americans would raise to affirmatively answer, "How many of you are a Christian?" Common sense tells us something is wrong with that kind of response because if the majority were truly "Christian" then how could we be experiencing so many moral and spiritual problems today? Why wouldn't every law passed in America conform to scriptural standards? How could America not obviously be anything other than "Christian" if such a majority claimed to be so? Barna realized that he had to narrow the requirements in order to uncover the truth. He chose to determine who exactly was an "Evangelical" rather than simply "Christian" because Evangelicals were supposed to be closer to the definition of someone who practiced what they preached rather than merely being a cultural Christian or someone "Christian" in name only.

Barna developed a set of criteria he calls "the 9-point evangelical". Such people are defined according to the following rules:

1. They say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today.
2. They believe when they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Christ as Savior.

3. They say their faith is very important in their life today.
4. They believe they have a personal responsibility to share their beliefs with non-Christians.
5. They believe Satan exists.
6. They believe eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works.
7. They believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
8. They assert that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches.
9. They describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

In other words, if you ask everyone in a room if they consider themselves to be a "Christian", the vast majority of hands will go up. If you then ask, "How many of you are 'Evangelical' Christians?" only 35-40% of hands are still in the air. But if you ask everyone to keep their hand in the air to affirm they believe in each of the above nine points as they are read one by one, the end result will be that only about 8% of the room will still be holding a hand up. I do not outright disagree with Mr. Barna's criteria, but can we agree that this is the most basic of definitions and probably not the most definitive?

By what standard do **you** determine whether or not someone or something is "Christian"? The fact that this question has to be seriously asked is a powerful indicator of the times we live in. The odds are very good that if you are 30-35 years of age or younger that you do not know that the definition of "Christian" has changed dramatically in just the span of a single generation. It is the same with the term "Evangelical". Things which in the first half of my life were identified as "heresy", "false teaching", and out-and-out "lies" are today, quite shockingly, accepted as being "Christian" and/or "Evangelical" in the second half of my life. That the **world** redefines terms according to their own notions is to be expected, but how does this happen within the walls of the **Church**? It has happened the same way it always has going back to the earliest days recorded in Scripture: by neglecting the Word.

When the propositional truth of God's Word is forsaken by those who are supposed to be its steadfast adherents, it is not surprising that the meaning of words and truth in general are the primary casualties. As with all terms at any time in history, the question is not really whether something is "Christian" or "Evangelical" – terms such as these are adopted and given a myriad variations of meaning depending on who co-opts them; the **real** litmus test is expressed by the standard, "Is it **scriptural**?" We no longer need to determine if something is "Christian" or "Evangelical", we have arrived at a time when it must be proven by Scripture alone. Both the terms "Christian" and "Evangelical" as used by the mainstream no longer equals "scriptural" as they may have in the past.

The whole of Scripture is rich with multiple themes recurring throughout, but one of the strongest is the direct cause and effect of adhering to or rejecting God's Word. It is the common denominator of what happened in the Garden of Eden, whenever a small remnant is left such as in the days of Noah and Lot, the difference between the unfaithful generation of Israelites denied entrance into the Promised Land versus the later faithful generation who gained admittance, and the notable revivals enjoyed under various judges, prophets, and kings. Who cannot notice that every scriptural role model exclusively adheres to God's Word and ways alone? It is the most common spiritual tug-of-war recorded in the Gospels where Christ's ministry is concerned, the difference **NOT** between those who accept or reject the **miracles** He performed, but His **Word**. It was not because they did not believe the host of miracles provided through Moses that the unfaithful generation did not attain to the Promised Land, but because they rejected the God-given Word through him.

What is common among all the backsliders, the worst spiritual examples, and every period of spiritual decline recorded in the whole of Scripture? It begins with redefining Scripture from its original, plain intended meaning. This always leads to something else being

substituted in the place of God's Word to render it ineffectual or to its ultimate, outright abandonment.

The history of Israel is a study in taking non-scriptural practices and incorporating them through a process of redefinition and assimilation. They would find themselves claiming to worship the God of Israel by incorporating the practices and techniques of false religions specifically forbidden by God's Word. They embraced the false notion that something could be legitimized by doing it in the name of the One True God. They were the forerunners of what is happening in the Church today where non-scriptural practices from everything from *Purpose Driven* to the Emergent Church to New Age influences all have the appearance of being "Christian" or "Evangelical" because they have co-opted and redefined the terms and concepts traditionally associated with "Christian" and "Evangelical". All of them have in common either the redefinition of the Word (particularly through horrendous re-translations of the Bible such as *The Word* or *The Voice*) or its outright abandonment.

> *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;*
> *Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness;*
> *Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!*
> *— Isaiah 5:20 (NASB)*

This is the constant tension in Christ's earthly ministry as recorded in the Gospels among people who were literally raised and educated in God's Word. We seem to overlook the fact that those rejecting Jesus first and foremost in the Gospels were those who were supposed to be "the people of the Book". But Jesus pointed out that because of their mishandling of the Word through Moses, they were therefore incapable of understanding the Word through Him.

> *"For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me.*
> *— John 5:46 (NASB)*

The Nativity narrative is a detailed example of the tension between accepting and rejecting the plain, original intent of God's Word. We see this time and time again in Christ's earthly ministry from the satanic twisting of God's Word in the Temptation in the wilderness at the outset of public ministry, to the constant battles with so-called experts in the Law, to the final question-and-answer conflict in the Temple just days before His crucifixion. Look at how many times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, " You have heard it said…but I say to you", not to mention the prolific number of teachings on the true meaning of the Law where the Sabbath is concerned and so forth. Spiritual warfare is not restricted to the stark differences between believers and non-believers; it is more often a case in Scripture between those who strictly adhere to God's Word versus those who attempt to redefine it.

Have you ever considered what a shame it is that so many covet a revival? All too often we have confused the term "revival" with "evangelism". Look at all the scriptural examples of "revival" and it quickly becomes apparent that it is something which is necessary **only** when God's people have backslidden into the old life they originally came from. The two most common characteristics of scriptural revival happen to be the same two common denominators for evangelizing the spiritually lost: the work of the cross and a commitment to the Word. Just as every evangelist calls the unsaved to obedience to God's Word through the blood of the cross, so every prophet appeals to the saved to likewise return to these very same basics.

In a world where so many false teachers and false spiritual movements not only call themselves "Christian" or "Evangelical" – and especially since they are so widely accepted as such – it is tempting to say that since those terms have been redefined from what they meant a scant 30 years ago that we need to reclaim them and give them back their original flavor. But that is another oft-repeated mistake. It is the same mistake made when someone wants to "go back" to a prior time they view as somehow being perfect such as the Jesus

Movement of the late 60's, the Great Awakening, or the Reformation. Going back to a "time" can never replace the need to go back to the Word.

In His Love,
Servant@WalkWithTheWord.org