

The Easy Conscience of Modern Evangelicalism
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When I went to work at Christianity Today in the fall of 1966, eighteen Years had passed since the publication of founding editor Carl F. H. Henry's book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Eerdmans, 1948), but we still talked about it a lot. Henry's work expressed what many of us were sensing at that time: that evangelicals had been avoiding the great social issues of the day, above all racism and the plight of the poor, and we were uneasy about it somewhere deep in our inmost thoughts and hearts.

Today another book needs to be written. It should not be called *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. It should be called *The Easy Conscience of Modern Evangelicalism*. For what has happened in the fifty years since Henry wrote his penetrating exposure of fundamentalists' sins and shortcomings is that evangelicals have become the new religious establishment with the same sad theology and practices that overtook the mainline denominations a generation ago, and we are not disturbed.

When I wrote about the mainline denominations years ago, I said that they had become largely secular institutions that were pursuing the world's wisdom, embracing the world's theology, following the world's agenda, and employing the world's methods. But that is what many evangelicals are doing today, though not in the same precise ways. Like the liberals before us, we too have fixed our eyes on a worldly kingdom and have made politics and money our weapons of choice for grasping it.

Evangelicals are not heretics, at least not consciously. We believe the Bible is the authoritative and inerrant Word of God. But many have abandoned this ancient wisdom of the Church because they do not think it is adequate for the challenges of our time. We still use the Bible's vocabulary, but we give it new meaning, pouring bad secular content into spiritual terms. Sin becomes dysfunctional behavior. Salvation is self-esteem or wholeness. Jesus becomes an example for right living more than a Savior from sin. As for our agenda, for many the goal is success, wonderful marriages and nice children; we do not think much about getting right with an offended

God. As for methods, many are preoccupied almost exclusively with numerical growth and money.

A few years ago, University of Chicago church historian Martin Marty said in an interview that in his judgment by the end of the century evangelicals would be "the most worldly people in America." We have fulfilled his prophecy, and it is not yet the year 2000. The tragic part of this is that evangelicals are largely unaware of what is happening. "We are living in a fool's paradise," said David Wells in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1994. We are dying for a lack of that robust, biblical, God-centered, Reformation theology that was always the heart of the evangelical movement. But we are content that it should be so, as long as our churches continue to be prosperous and no one tries too hard to shake us out of our personal peace and affluence.

We should spend some time reading the minor prophet Amos, for he lived in a time like our own. The religious establishment was at its peak of popularity. The temples were full. The sacrifices were offered. The people were living in nice homes. But it was an evil, corrupt time, and Amos called his generation to repent of their sinful complacency. "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion," he cried (Amos 6:1). The Authorized version reads, "Woe to them who are at ease in Zion."

I would like to see professed evangelicals become troubled by what is happening. I would like to see us distressed by our loss of a genuine proclamation of the Gospel and an awareness that we have become much like the liberals of the past, who declined into irrelevancy. I would like us to be disturbed by our neglect of evangelism, particularly among our affluent, worldly, and very pagan neighbors. I would like us to become uneasy about our failure to establish strong churches in America's inner cities, where the breakdown of American culture is so obvious and the needs of the people are so great.

We need what the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has been seeking: To repent of our worldliness, to recover the great doctrines of the Bible, as the Reformers did, and to see that truth embodied in our doctrine, worship practices, and church life.