

## A PostChristian Future for Evangelicalism?

### 1. Post-Christian Protestantism

[Method] My title is provocative, so I need to begin by saying a little bit about what I'm trying to provoke. Let me clarify from the outset: this is not about individuals. I'm not trying to decide whether this or that person is "really a Christian." That's a game I don't ever want to play. The target of my criticism here is social not individual: the rhetoric, culture and practices which are likely to lead the Evangelical churches in a post-Christian direction. The way to personalize it is to consider what YOU think of this rhetoric etc. that I'm attacking. If you like that rhetoric and use it, what do you make of my criticisms?

[Thesis] So here's what I do want to say: There is trajectory toward a post-Christian future that many Protestant denominations have taken. It has three major stages, moving from a Biblical piety through a liberal stage to a stage of post-Christian pluralism. You can see this trajectory being followed in the mainline Protestant denominations, and--here's the really controversial part of my thesis--I think the evangelical churches have started to take the same trajectory, several generations behind the mainline in moving in the direction of a post-Christian future.

I think the trajectory I'm talking about is pretty easy to see in the mainline Protestant churches, since several mainline Protestant denominations have gotten to that last stage already. The clearest example is the Unitarian church, which has been post-Christian for many, many decades, perhaps well over a century, and is now explicitly a form of religious pluralism rather than a form of Christian religion: the Unitarians *know* they're not Christian, most of them don't *like* Christianity and they know it. The other mainline Prot. churches that have gone post-Christian don't know it yet: they haven't yet reached the stage of self-knowledge the Unitarians are at. They're still playing the game of: "oh, I'm just as good a Christian as *you*, even IF I don't believe in your repressive, exclusive dogmas like Jesus being God and rising from the dead and the authority of the Bible and all that." The Unitarians have grown out of that game: they don't even *want* to think of themselves as Christians. Of course they know their denomination has its roots in the Christian tradition, but now they are quite explicitly *not* Christian. They are precisely: *post*-Christians. Their denomination was once Christian but not any more.

I should tell you about the exception that proves the rule, here. Recently there's been a movement of *Christian* Unitarians, which is challenging the Unitarian churches to actually accept Christians in their midst. They're getting a lot of resistance, and are definitely not welcome in many Unitarian congregations. You see the irony here: precisely because the Unitarians departed from the *Christian* tradition, it is Christianity that they must distance themselves from in order to defend their identity. But they are now far enough down the road of post-Christianity that they can consider allowing even Christianity to be part of the religious pluralism of their denomination. The other post-Christian Protestant churches are not so far down the road--they still want to think of themselves as Christians even though they've given up

the substance of Christian belief--and so they are much less tolerant of anything approaching Christian orthodoxy. In order to be a pastor in denominations like that, it is more or less required that you not have orthodox views on such matters as the authority of Scripture or sexual morality. To hold such views would make you "rigid" and "exclusive" and so on, and therefore a bad Christian. But the pretense that holding pluralist views, rejecting even the most basic Christian doctrines, actually makes you a better Christian is a piece of conceptual confusion that won't last for more than a generation or two, I think: it looks to me like the post-Christian Protestant denominations are all headed firmly in the same direction as the Unitarians, where eventually (in another generation or two) they'll be distant enough from Christianity to recognize that they don't even *want* to think of themselves as Christians.

No Evangelical church known to me is anywhere near that last stage--the stage of post-Christian pluralism--but much of Evangelical culture, I think, is already well into the second stage, the liberal stage. I want to talk about the dynamics that lead from one stage to another. It's a generational dynamics: a generation that's raised in one stage can find reasons to move on to the next. There is no slippery slope here, no inevitable progression, but it is quite natural to keep moving down this road once you've set out on it--and I want to sketch this movement or trajectory for you and alert you to what I believe are its fundamental dynamics.

## 2. Evangelical Liberalism

Now you might think that Evangelicalism is a different animal from the mainline Protestant Churches. You might even think that the difference is *defined* by the fact that *we're* not liberal and *they* are. But judging by most definitions of what liberal theology is, the American evangelical churches are clearly liberal, not primarily in their theology but in their piety and practices--their spirituality, if you like that term.

So what is liberalism in religion? In most definitions, it is closely associated with or founded on a turn to experience. And now you know why I think evangelicals have become liberals! Liberalism means a turn to experience, an attempt to base Christian faith on Christian experience (rather than the other way around). If you are as old as I am or older, you may realize this is a rather recent development, certainly less than 50 years old. A piety based on God's word rather than on experience used to be the norm among evangelical churches in America, and it is still present, strong and healthy, in a great many of them. But judging by the student culture here, it is in retreat. If you were to ask most students here (at least those who haven't heard this talk!) what the foundation of their faith was, I expect that far more would speak about the experience of God working in their lives than would mention the Bible or even Jesus Christ.

Or to put the test another way. There are a great many students here who think they are supposed to know God's will for their lives. A fair number of them even practice a form of piety in which they get up in the morning and God tells them what to do with all sorts of daily challenges. They'll tell you that "Today God led me to do thus and such, or God revealed to me that I should do this, or I think God's telling to go here," or even: "I think God called you to be my girlfriend...." That last one, of course, gives away the game. "Finding God's will for your life" is really a game in which you try to figure out which of the desires of your heart is really

God. Of course I think all of this is self-deception. And here's the test I would propose: my guess is that a large majority of the people who talk this way could not from memory tell you all 10 commandments. That is to say, they think they know all about God's will for their lives, yet are ignorant of God's will revealed in Scripture. I think it's pretty obvious that they're replacing God's revealed will with the thoughts of their own hearts. That's an example of the transition from stage 1 to stage 2--from a piety based on God's word to a piety based on experience.

And they're doing this, let me emphasize, because *that's how they were taught*. It's not as if they were taught a sound Biblical piety and then decided that they preferred to be self-centered. That's not it at all. They were taught *in church* that the place to find God is in their own experience, in their own hearts, in their own selves. The fact that this is not their own idea but their church's is what I mean by saying the focus of my criticism here is not individual but social. "Finding God's will for my life" is a *social* practice, though it is an individualistic social practice--and like many forms of individualism it can only survive as long as we fail to recognize that it *is* a social practice, whose origin lies in larger cultural developments and not in each individual's heart. Individualism is always a *social* phenomenon, though individualists have a vested interest in not recognizing this: that's one of many ways in which individualists can only survive as individualists by deceiving themselves.

A word on my harsh words. I speak of self-deception because, for theological and philosophical reasons, I think self-deception is built into any piety that takes individual experience as its foundation rather than God's word. *Theologically*, I think that to base religious beliefs on experience rather than on God's word means to base our religion on the thoughts of our own heart--self-chosen worship, the Reformers called it. And *philosophically*, I don't think experience is the foundation of belief systems, but the other way round. Beliefs and practices give shape to our experience. Experiences are not the basis of faith, but faith forms our experience (e.g., in the process of discipleship and Christian formation). Of course our experiences do "act back" on our belief systems, causing us to modify this or that particular belief. We do learn from experience, after all. But experience is not the beginning or basis of the belief system. The belief system called Christian faith, for instance, existed long before I had any experiences at all--long before my birth--and I learned to have religious experiences by learning to think and feel about the world in Christian terms, which I learned from the Bible and the Church and other Christians and Christian books and music. As a result of that learning, that *formation* as it's called, I have experiences like weeping at favorite hymns, an overwhelming sense of gratitude for Christ's presence in the eucharist, a perception of God's glory in the rising of the sun. All of these religious experiences come AFTER my learning the Gospel of Christ. I could not possibly have such deep feelings about the eucharist, for instance, if I had not learned the story of Jesus Christ (which is called the Gospel) in which he gave himself to us by promising: This is my body, given for you.

So in general, experience comes *after* belief. The fundamental mistake of liberalism, shared now by both mainline and evangelical Protestants, is to suppose that it's the other way round: that experience is the foundation of Christian faith. What happens to the culture and practices of churches which make that fundamental mistake? It's rather paradoxical: liberal churches create a religious culture based on the false premise that religious experience comes before belief. What happens to people in a culture that *trains* people to *believe in* that mistake--

to fundamentally misconstrue the nature of their experience by trying to make it the basis of their religious beliefs? Well first of all, as I've already suggested, it requires them to deceive themselves. It institutes *practices* of self-deception, such as "finding God's will for your life," which I invite you to consider as a prime example of evangelical liberalism (not the only example, but the one I'll analyse at length, since it does so much harm to students here).

### 3. E.g. "Finding God's Will for your Life"

The first thing to say about this practice is that it's very recent: it's become central to evangelical piety only within my lifetime. Many of you have read Gerald Sittser's fine book on this, where he criticizes this practice, and makes (I think) only one minor mistake about it: he calls it "the traditional" view. As someone who studies the Christian tradition, I can tell you it's not traditional at all; on the contrary, it's quite alien to the Christian tradition as well as to the Bible. That's why so many Eastern students end up not believing in it by the time they graduate. Here at Eastern you're often required to read the great old books of the Christian tradition, including the Bible. And when you read them you'll discover there's nothing like this practice of "finding God's will for your life" anywhere in the Bible or the Christian tradition. I can't even find it in books written by and about Evangelicals as recently as 50 years ago, though there was a practice called "guidance" which is its precursor, and which I think can be traced back to British fundamentalism about a century ago (in what's called the Keswick movement). But if by "traditional" you mean the Christian tradition since the time of the New Testament, this is not a traditional practice. It's a recent phenomenon of Evangelicalism, and now a central practice of Evangelical liberalism--a major part of the Evangelical church's turn away from Holy Scripture and toward experience as the basis of Evangelical religion.

This turn is of course individualistic, but since individualism is a form of self-deception it's important not to take the self-understanding of this individualistic experience too seriously. Individualism is not an idea created by individual experience. It is a cultural phenomenon. So practices like "finding God's will for your life" are not things that you came up with on the basis of your own individual experience. You were taught to do it. That's why so many of Eastern students find it a terrible burden. Not having been taught to engage in this social practice myself, I was alerted by my students, who have frequently written about it in their papers, and the papers consistently express a terrible sense of burden: "finding God's will for my life" is dreadfully difficult to do and leaves people haunted by awful doubts--how can I tell if this is really God's voice I'm listening to, or whether it's just my own? How do you tell the difference? What if I make a mistake about this and base my life on my will not God's? What if I end up with God's "second-best" will for my life? They have these doubts, I think, because they are too honest and perceptive to be good at this form of self-deception--and they feel guilty for that. For they take it for granted that this awful stuff about "finding God's will for your life" is something they're *supposed* to do. (That's what marks it as a social practice).

So the good news is: this is a form of self-deception that is completely unBiblical and contrary to nearly the whole of the Christian tradition--so you don't have to do it. Instead, you can do what Christians have traditionally done: work at learning to obey God's will as revealed in holy Scripture, not in your heart. That includes learning how to make mature and responsible Christian decisions, in the light of God's word and in the context of praying for wisdom and

asking for the advice and counsel of other Christians. The point is: God does not make your decisions for you (i.e. he does not reveal his particular will for your life). He reveals his will in his Word, where he gives you his commandments so that you may know what kind of life is pleasing to him. So God does reveal his will--through Scripture, not through your private inner experience--but that doesn't take away your responsibility to make your own decisions. You can tell this is true, because Scripture teaches that God will hold you responsible for your decisions. On Judgment Day we shall all be called to account for our lives and our decisions, and we will be in no position to say: "Hey, God, you can't hold me accountable for my decisions; I didn't make my own decisions--I always let you make them for me." Don't try to make excuses like before the Judgement Throne of God! You are responsible for your own decisions, because YOU'RE the one who made them. That's what Judgment Day is all about.

That is good news, I think: God allows you to become a grown up person, responsible for your own actions and decisions. You can know he allows this because he actually commands it, in his Word. In the Bible He commands you, in no uncertain terms, to get wisdom (see the book of Proverbs!). And this means he requires you to be responsible for your own decisions (because you can't learn wisdom in decision making if you're not responsible for your own decisions). That's clear for instance, from the parables of our Lord. Remember all those stewards who are put in charge of things and then have to give an account of their doings when the master returns? Notice how it works: the steward is a servant who is required to obey his master's word. But he does that precisely by making his own decisions, making them wisely, so his master will be pleased when he returns. If he refuses to make his own decisions and insists on waiting until his master comes back to tell him what to do--burying his talents--then the master is mightily displeased. So you see our situation: our Lord does NOT make our decisions for us! He holds us accountable for our decisions. For they're OUR decisions, not His. But here's the good news: we CAN make decisions that please our Lord. Our very own decisions, not his. OUR decisions, and they can please him! Not that we can make good decisions without his grace. But the fact that he helps us by the grace of his Spirit does not mean the decisions aren't our own. To put it in traditional terms: Grace does not take away free will.

So that's good news. You're allowed to grow up into a mature and responsible Christian, because you're allowed to base your faith on something other than your own individual experience. You don't have to practice deceiving yourself all the time. Isn't that a relief? (You see I'm trying to convince you of this--hoping that you will hear this as good news. What do you think?) I at least am deeply grateful that I was never taught that I must "find God's will for my life." It would destroy my faith, because I know I couldn't possibly believe myself as I did it--I'd recognize that I was deceiving myself. I'm hoping that you too, if you search the Scriptures and think carefully about it, will realize that basing your faith on the experience of your own heart is not some kind of *privilege* but a terrible burden imposed upon you by a culture that is well worth escaping. God is so much kinder than our own hearts. All he expects from us is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, as the prophet says. He doesn't expect us to twist ourselves into knots trying to find which one of the voices in our hearts is really him. They're ALL *our own* voices, and that's OK! He doesn't, as a rule, speak in our hearts. He speaks in Scripture, in good preaching, in the voice of wise Christians--and in our hearts, if we've learned Scripture "by heart," as we say. But he doesn't tell us anything about our particular individual future. He is too kind for that, and too insistent on our responsibility to learn to make

our own decisions--to make them wisely and well. No, we don't have to find God's voice in our hearts. All we have to do is obey his Word. And in that is freedom, as well as the possibility of learning to become honest and responsible adults.

So I think Evangelical liberalism has messed you up inside by imposing this terrible burden on you, making you feel like you have a responsibility to "find God's will for your life." That *sense of a terrible burden* is precisely what happens when a cultural practice that is bad for you is being imposed on you. It's an individualistic cultural practice, but it is a CULTURAL practice for all that. You didn't make up this idea; it was imposed on you, and it has shaped your experience. It would be much better to have had your experience shaped by the Bible--for example, by the 10 commandments. Studying them and trying to obey them was what evangelicals USED to mean by learning "God's will for their lives." But that was back before Evangelicalism entered its liberal phase.

By the way, please don't suppose that what I'm going on about here is how we must all be less self-centered. There is no more self-centered project in the world than the project of being "unself-centered"--it's all about the self! So let's not play that game. The contrast I'm concerned about, rather, is that between inner and outer. It's a matter of where you direct your attention. What we all want to find is not ourselves but God. The big question is: should we try to find God within, in our hearts, or outside ourselves? That's the fundamental issue. Now, Christ does dwell in our hearts by faith, but that doesn't mean we can find him by looking there, within ourselves. For faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the word of God, as the apostle says, and the word of God comes to us from outside our own hearts. That's how attention and learning work: suppose you want to experience the color green. Do you look for it inside your heart? Of course not! You look at something green outside you. It is like that with Christ. You want Christ to dwell in your hearts by faith? Then pay attention to God's word, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You can't find Christ by looking within, even when he dwells within. For faith comes by hearing--paying attention to a Word that comes from outside you. That fundamental structure (you get something within you by paying attention to what is outside you) is what the liberals never get. If they understood that, they would stop being liberals.

#### 4. On Liberalism in General

So let me turn now to Liberalism in general--and explore the question what current evangelical liberalism has in common with the older, classic liberal theology of the mainline Protestant churches. The basic idea of liberalism, as I've said, is a turn to experience as the foundation of faith--to find God in Christian experience rather than in Scripture. Liberalism typically treats Scripture as an *expression* of Christian experience rather than the *source* of Christian experience. It's a crucial step toward a post-Christian future because your heart or your experience can't tell you about Jesus Christ unless you've heard the Gospel, which is a story that comes to you from outside your heart. Of course, once your heart is formed by Christ's word, then it may become a place to find him--as for instance, if you've learned a lot of Scripture "by heart" (as we still say) and turn to this memorized Scripture in your heart when you need the comfort and strength of the Gospel. This is one of the many ways in which Christian experience is BASED on God's word, not the other way round. Indeed, ALL Christian experience is based on God's word, directly or indirectly, which is why a turn to experience that leaves God's word

behind eventually leads to a post-Christian future. But it doesn't do that right away. For several generations, the self-deception about finding Christ directly in your heart works, because people's hearts are still formed by specifically Biblical and Christian practices--by the reading of Scripture and practices like baptism and the eucharist. But the THEORY is that these are really expressions of your deeper Christian experience, rather than their source. For the negative starting point of liberal theology (which leads to its positive starting point in experience) is a failure of belief in these outward forms of Christianity.

The classic liberalism of the mainline churches began with a crisis of faith over Christian doctrine. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when liberal theology was invented in Germany, theologians were facing a crisis of faith. Convinced that modern science no longer allowed them to believe the Biblical narratives or orthodox Christian doctrine, they needed an alternative foundation for Christian faith, and they turned to Christian experience and inner feeling. Now, give these guys credit. They were facing a serious crisis of faith and they tried to figure out a way to hang on to Christian faith when the old Biblical and doctrinal foundations of the faith seemed unbelievable. Their solution was a terrible mistake, and one that I have the utmost difficulty being fair to, because I think it is poisonous self-deception (and every time I let it into my heart it depresses me). So I have a gut level reaction against the suggestion that I should find Jesus in my heart, and a deep heartfelt gratitude whenever anybody preaches Christ from the Scriptures (which doesn't happen nearly often enough, I'm afraid). But liberal theology I can only experience as soul-destroying poison. Which is why I try to give liberal theologians credit and be fair: they had a crisis on their hands, and they tried to remain Christians through it. But what they tried doesn't work.

Now the motives for Evangelical liberalism are different, I think. I can be a little more fair to theologians of this sort because I've never let them get anywhere near my heart. I don't think anyone who has tasted the sweetness of reading good Christian books--I mean the great old books of the tradition, including the Bible--can ever be tempted by evangelical Christian liberalism. For its motives are shallower than the older mainline Protestant liberalism. They have to do with churches trying to hang on to their young people in a media-saturated age. The turn to experience in Evangelicalism is an attempt to convince young people that Jesus experiences are even better than drug experiences and TV and shopping. In other words, Evangelical liberalism is basically a form of consumer religion. It's not a serious theological position like the older mainline liberalism.

But it is seriously preached, and it often borrows concepts and concerns from the older liberalism. For instance, there is the need pastors feel to be "relevant." That's a concept that evangelical and mainline liberalism share. The turn to experience reflects a desperate quest by pastors to be relevant to their congregations. This is liberal theology at its saddest. You can think of liberal preaching as based on a fundamental mistake about education--a fundamental pedagogical mistake--the attempt to be relevant. What liberals don't get is that attempts to be relevant are boring--without a single exception, in my experience. It's an amazing experience to go from reading something wonderful and beautiful in the Bible to hearing some poor pastor trying to show you how it's relevant to your life. The Biblical passage is thrilling, leaving an indelible mark on your soul. The sermon about its relevance is so boring you're tuned out after 2 minutes. When will liberals ever learn? Imagine going to a Shakespeare class and instead of

learning to understand Shakespeare's wonderful poetry you're treated to a lecture about how relevant it is to your life! Or imagine going to a math class and instead of learning something interesting and beautiful like math, you get a lecture on how relevant math is to our lives. If what you like is MATH, then the lecture on relevance will just be a boring distraction: "why aren't we learning something interesting here, like math? or Shakespeare? or the Gospel of Christ?" I'm safe from ever becoming a liberal because I'm a baby-boomer and I've been subjected to "relevant" education ever since kindergarten, and I know from experience that the attempt to be relevant is ALWAYS boring, whereas the Scriptures, like Shakespeare and Math and other deep truths, is beautiful and thrilling and gets deep into my heart and makes me a different and better person.

But here it's a matter of cultural practices again. In mainline seminaries and increasingly in Evangelical seminaries, pastors are kept away from reading great books of the Christian faith and taught that they are supposed to be relevant, and trained in techniques for being relevant which insult the intelligence of their congregation and bore them half to death. That's the high tide of liberalism: the boring "relevant" sermon, where you're told all about your Christian life and experience but learn nothing about Jesus Christ or God's word.

[[There may not be time for this section] I think the mischief got started even before the invention of liberal theology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is at work in about 98% of the sermons I've ever heard, so let me say a little bit about it. The root problem is the old division of sermons into two parts, called doctrine and application, which basically means: theory and practice. This means that the Gospel is treated as a theory, something dead which we make alive in our lives by applying it in practice. And of course that's the opposite of the truth: the Gospel is not a theory but God's promise, which changes us and makes us alive in Christ, because it's God's kind word to us, the story of Jesus Christ in which we find eternal life. To believe that the promises in this story are about you is to receive Christ, which makes you a Christian and a partaker in eternal life. So the Gospel is not a theory, it's the Word of God that changes your life, makes you a Christian and sustains you in the faith. The doctrine/application scheme for sermons tries to change all that. It tries to make the Gospel (which is God's way of changing your life) into a mere theory, so that the place where your life is changed is when you apply it to your life.

Liberal theology is what happens when the "application" part of the sermon grows to swallow up the whole sermon, so that there's no doctrine left, just nice, boring, "relevant" advice about how to live the Christian life and have Christian experiences (say, to experience "inner healing," which is a big thing in a lot of Evangelical churches nowadays). In terms of the original Protestant theology, what this means is that Law replaces Gospel. The Gospel is a story about Jesus Christ and what he does for us. The Law is God telling us what to do with our lives. The difference is simple but absolutely fundamental, and very easy to overlook: the Gospel is about what Christ does, the Law is about what we do. The application part of the sermon, where you tell people what to do with the Gospel, how to live the Christian life and have Christian experiences, is therefore Law, not Gospel. Any discourse which is about what we are supposed to do is at best Law, not Gospel. For the Gospel is not about what we do (remember?) but about what Christ does. That's why it's good news and changes our lives--precisely because it's not about us and how we are supposed to change our lives, but about Jesus Christ and what he does to change our lives. Our efforts to live the Christian life do not make a fundamental change in



our lives. The story of Jesus Christ does, when we believe it: for that's precisely what faith in the Gospel IS--believing the story of what Jesus Christ does for us and our salvation.

But what we get instead, in the liberal church, is boring, "relevant" application to our lives. The application section grows to swallow up the whole sermon. Which means that the Gospel gradually drops out of view altogether and the sermon is no longer even the Law of God, but only advice about how to live nice lives, be unselfish, experience inner healing, transform society, change the world, and so on. We hear this every Sunday and every Sunday it's still boring. For it's about us, not Jesus. It's all about being relevant to our lives.

Picture: the two sides of the paper

what happens when self becomes increasingly larger in the picture:

the cross diminishes until it's just one symbol among others ]

## 5. From Liberalism to Post-Christian Pluralism

Mainline Prot. liberalism is largely disappearing and being replaced by post-Christian pluralism. There's a dynamic that leads to this replacement. As our religion becomes more and more "relevant," more and more about OUR lives and less and less about Jesus Christ, our experience becomes less and less Christian and more and more generically religious. You start out looking for Christ in your life and end up looking for God in your heart, and ANYONE can do that: in fact Hindus, New-Agers, Goddess worshippers, certain sorts of Muslims and Jews all do that. So who's to say that our experience as Christians is any more real than their experience? Aren't we really all experiencing God's love in our own way? Why should we Christians insist on everybody being tied down to the story about Jesus? Why can't we admit that everybody's religious experience is equally valid? Why can't we be more inclusive? And of course once you've gotten to that point you are a post-Christian pluralist.

So you see the motives that lead from liberalism to post-Christian pluralism. Since Christian experience is always in fact based on God's word, the liberal turn to experience as the basis of faith only works for as long as practices of studying and preaching Scripture are firmly in place in the churches. But as the liberal evangelical churches become more and more "relevant" (that is, more and more about us) the experiences become less and less specifically Christian, until you have no reason to "exclude" all those other nice people with their experiences of God's love, even though they don't believe in Christ.

To go back to the example of "finding God's will for your life" by listening to what God is telling you in your heart. That's always self-deception, I've been suggesting, because the voices in our hearts are our own. But some of those voices can be very Biblical voices, if our hearts have been shaped and formed by the teachings of Scripture. Indeed, if we have learned some of the Scriptures by heart, the voice of our hearts can speak God's own word, just as our literal voices can literally speak God's word when we read it aloud. In both cases, it's God's word, though the voice is our own. Hence, though the voices in our hearts are always our own, they can be voices of Christian wisdom and truth--precisely because the real source of our wisdom is not our own hearts but Holy Scripture. Here's where the Holy Spirit is at work, forming our hearts according to the truth of God's Word, so that the thoughts and feelings and experience of our hearts are increasingly rooted in the knowledge and love of Christ. Whenever you discern

that you have grown in faith, hope or love, you should thank God for the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart.

But if you make a practice of turning to your heart *rather than* to Scripture as the source of your knowledge of God, those voices within you will become less and less Biblical, less and less informed by the Gospel of Christ. You'll have people who don't know the 10 commandments but are convinced that God has revealed his will about who should be their girlfriend or whom they should marry. The children of people who think like that are likely to know very little of the Bible but will take it for granted that whatever they feel most deeply in their hearts is Christian. And *their* children, who learn in church to find God only in their hearts, will have no good reason to deny that whatever experience of God's love a Hindu or Moslem has must also be real, so why should we impose Jesus on them when they experience God in their own way? It's all different roads to the same ultimate Reality, isn't it? And by that time Evangelical churches will start arriving at the same post-Christian pluralism that the mainline Protestant churches have been arriving at for about a generation now.

The Evangelical Churches are not nearly so far along the road to a post-Christian future as the mainline Protestants. They're roughly where the Unitarian churches were in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century, fast losing interest in orthodox Christian doctrine, but still very committed to inculcating specifically Christian experience and values. But I've already said why I think that won't last for many generations in the absence of serious commitment to Biblical piety, a life lived not according to the inner experience of our hearts, but rather hearts shaped by God's word.

[if there's time....]

## 6. Countervailing forces

What might slow or reverse the progress of evangelical churches along the trajectory toward a post-Christian future? Practices that deepen our understanding and experience of Holy Scripture, that teach us to live by it and, as it were, live within its world: to understand the story of God as it tells as our own story. Here are some things we could do, and which many evangelicals are already doing. Wherever people are doing these things, the movement toward a post-Christian future for evangelicalism is reversed.

1. Strengthen the old evangelical practice of small group Bible Study, which is evangelical Christianity's most fundamental institution for Christian formation of youth. Those of you who know your Bible well probably learned it in small group Bible Study--years of it!--where you not only learned the Bible but learned to read it as having authority over your life, so that ever afterwards you come to the Bible as God's word which governs your life. But this institution is nowadays practiced less and less in evangelical churches, being replaced with various forms of church as entertainment, which is particularly prominent in youth groups (this is one of the things Duffy Robbins is working *against*, by the way). And the practice of reading Scripture as authoritative for your life is undermined as the Bible comes to be treated, not as God's kind word to you nor as a word you must obey, but as a theory that needs to be made "relevant" or "applied to your life."

One of the big problems about "application" is that it's just a lousy way to read. People who love reading--readers of poetry, teachers of great books, think of your English professors--

never "apply" them to their lives. They let the words into their hearts, they enter the world of the text, they are thrilled and enchanted, shaped and transformed by their reading--but they never try to "apply it to their lives." You apply theories or *techniques*. And great books are not theories or techniques, but storehouses of wisdom that are meant to shape our hearts. The Bible is not an exception to this, except insofar as a whole community is deliberately being shaped by it--the church. But of course the evangelical churches are being shaped less and less by it: they are full of Biblical techniques, which they want you to apply to your life (techniques for improving self-esteem, for instance, or for "inner healing"--I've even seen supposedly "Biblical" techniques for dieting) rather than being shaped by Biblical wisdom.

As the practice of small group Bible Study continues to erode, evangelical students will come to Eastern knowing less and less of the Bible. Professors who have been here longer than I have, already see that happening. On the other hand, the churches which insist on young people attending small group Bible studies are the ones which are holding the line against the movement toward a post-Christian future for evangelicals. But this by itself is not really enough. There are other things to do as well. The most radical would be to--

2. Recover an ancient practice that Evangelicals have largely lost: eucharistic piety, the thanksgiving and joy for the presence of Christ in the place his Word has shown us--giving us a very concrete way to find the presence of God outside our own hearts, together with a promise that his presence will literally be incorporated into our lives.

3. Keep on learning from the Great Tradition, as Evangelicals have begun to do (witness Chris Hall's books on reading and praying and worshipping with the church fathers). Also of great importance is the ongoing conversation between evangelicals and Roman Catholics (ecumenical dialogue with Rome being one of the major forces pulling back one important sector of mainline Protestant theologians from the post-Christian future of the remainder of the denominations).

4. Preach the Gospel: ie. tell the story of Jesus and locate us within it, i.e., as sinners who receive his grace. [this is something I'll say more about if I have time at this point--see bracketted point above] We need to hear less about our own lives and more about Jesus.

5. Forget "applying it to your life." Think instead in terms of *obedience*. I.e., replace the unBiblical language of "application," "relevance" and "experience" with the Biblical language of obedience. The Bible does not contain anything that applies to your life, because it doesn't contain theories or techniques; it contains commandments. You apply theories; you obey commandments.

6. Learn to spiritually become sinners (as Martin Luther puts it). I.e, we need instruction not in *being* sinners (that's easy) but in *understanding* ourselves to be sinners, i.e. to be those for whom Christ died. Now don't get me wrong. When I speak of learning to be sinners, I do not mean preaching fire and brimstone and trying to scare people into accepting Jesus. That's a form of abuse and manipulation that we could all do without. When I say we need to learn to be sinners, I'm not saying, we have to be meaner to people, more moralistic, enforce the rules, crack

down harder. On the contrary, I'm talking about what Luther calls, "the Gospel's use of the Law": I'm talking about the good news that we are the sort of people for whom Christ died.

The refusal to teach us to be sinners is, so far as I can tell, the most common first step in a church's move from Biblical piety to liberal religion. Once you forget that you're a sinner, you start to forget what the Gospel is about, because the Gospel is only for sinners. Indeed, you start losing interest in the Gospel and looking for way to make it more relevant to your life, precisely because you no longer hear it as good news for people like yourself, but as a theory that has nothing to do with you, really, which is why you need to figure out how to apply it to your life. And then, of course, you start resenting the very mention of the word sin, as if it was an insult to your self-esteem, and so on.

For all of us who have learned to be sinners, it is a great comfort when a pastor or a hymn calls us sinners, for that is what really speaks to us and addresses us where we live. I'm not sure if there is any way to explain this in few words, so let me try a song, with which I'll close. It's a lovely old hymn that you can hear in the film "O Brother where art thou?" as a whole congregation of people in white robes walks down to the water to be baptized.

As I went down to the river to pray  
 Studying about that good old way  
 And who shall wear the robe and crown  
 Good Lord, show me the way.

O, sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down  
 O sisters, let's go down, down to the river to pray.

The tune is simple but strong, so you can sing it many times without getting tired of it. So it is repeated, with minor variations, many times on the CD. In each verse there's only one real change. Each verse is addressed to a different group of people: first O sisters, then O brothers, then O mothers, then O fathers. But the best comes last, when the song opens up to embrace us all. For the last verse addresses sinners, and that includes all of us.

O sinners, let's go down, let's go down, won't you come on down  
 O sinners, let's go down, down to the river to pray.  
 Well, sinners, shall we do that? Amen, I say.