Abstract

At a session of Dallas Theological Seminary’s Leader Board, Dr. Mark Bailey drew a sharp line between the Evangelical faith taught at DTS and the liberal theology that is taking over so many churches and seminaries today. Dr. Bailey said, “Liberal theologian H. Richard Neibuhr put it well when he said, ‘Let’s be honest. Liberal theology is that a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.’ By contrast, the term ‘evangelical’ comes from the Greek word euangelion, which means ‘good news.’ The gospel is the good news of salvation brought to needy sinners by the grace of God provided in Jesus Christ.” We are glad to be able to share with you an excerpt from Dr. Bailey’s message on four core doctrines that, when compromised, signify a departure from a true biblical faith.
I want to focus today on what I believe is the core of the Evangelical faith. What truly separates a biblical theology from a liberal theology? At Dallas Theological Seminary, we have a substantial doctrinal statement that the faculty and our Board must sign on an annual basis, an affirmation of our faith. We have seven core doctrines that students must hold to be admitted and to graduate from DTS. But in my 47 years of ministry, I’ve observed that there are four irreducible minimums, which are so interconnected that when one of them falls, the others quickly fail as well and an entire theology is compromised.

**BIBLIOLOGY: THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE**

A belief that the Bible is the authority from God has always been a foundational tenet of Evangelicalism. When we speak of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, what we mean is that we believe the Bible, which is the Word of God, is without error. Simply put, if God is without error and God speaks through His Word, then His Word, the Bible, is without error.

This concept of inerrancy extends only to the original documents. However, even though they have been hand-copied and translated through the centuries, they have been faithfully preserved so that we have a virtually inerrant text. It will not lead us into error unless someone has deliberately altered it for the purposes of their own bias.

One of the best passages in the Bible about the Bible is 2 Peter 1:20–21, which says, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

By “prophecy of Scripture,” Peter is referring to the whole of Scripture
as prophetic truth spoken by an anointed prophet of God. In other words, Peter says, “What you have in your Bible is not the result of individual ideas or human intuition.” Instead, men spoke from God as they were moved along by the Spirit.

In Greek, it’s clear that Peter has rearranged the word order of this statement for emphasis. A literal translation of the word order would be, “But by the Holy Spirit being moved or borne along, spoke from God men.” The term for “borne along” is nautical, describing wind in the sails or the sea holding up a boat. The word “men” is last in the sentence because the channel by which God spoke, the authors of Scripture, is the point of least importance, almost incidental. It was the means. It wasn’t the cause, and it wasn’t the result. God’s Word was the desired result.

The point is that it all started with God. Men spoke the Scriptures because God wanted them to do so, and they did so by being borne along by the Spirit. That’s the process of inspiration.

While 2 Peter 1:20–21 describes the process of inspiration, in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 we find its product, or what Scripture should look like as a result of that process. Paul writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

In Greek, the passage begins, “Pasa graphe theopneustos.” The phrase “Pasa graphe” is singular and refers to every part of the Scripture and, therefore, necessarily to the whole. The word theopneustos occurs only once in the Bible and is a composite of three words: Theos, the word for God; pneuma, the word for “air” or “spirit”; and the suffix tos, meaning “the result of.”

Thus, “Every writing of the Scripture is theopneustos—the result of the
Spirit or breath of God.” If I had the original, I would have an inerrant Word of God. So for example, although the modern world scorns them as myths and human inventions, the first 22 chapters of Genesis are quoted by Jesus and the New Testament writers as historically accurate and literally true.

In fact, the Word of God written—the Bible—and the Word of God living—Jesus—stand or fall together. Both hinge on God’s ability to use a human agency to produce a perfect product. As the great Christmas account in Luke states, “That which is in you has been conceived in you by the Holy Spirit.” If God can use a human, a young maiden, as the instrument of the Incarnation of His Son, it is not surprising that He should also be able to use men to write the Bible by means of the Holy Spirit. Both are scientifically impossible in the natural sense, but possible for an omnipotent God.

In the end, as Christians our choice is not whether we can rationalize the Bible or figure it out by using our human reason. Our choice is simply whether we will believe Jesus and the Bible . . . or not.

**Christology: The Majesty of Jesus Christ**

The second irreducible minimum of Evangelical faith is what I call “the Majesty of Jesus Christ.” It is summed up in these words from Major Ian Thomas: “He had to come as He did so that He could be what He was, which is the Son of God.”

Jesus could be the Son of God without becoming human. He was that from eternity past. But He could only become the Son of Man by means of the virgin birth, and only the Son of God could come to us in that way. Furthermore, He had to be the virgin-born Son of God, fully human yet perfect, to provide redemption.
Years ago, after I had given a talk in which I referenced Jonah and the fish, a pastor approached me to ask why I had not told the crowd the truth—that the story was a myth, as the liberals believe. I was able to answer him with a striking example of the crucial relationship between the inerrancy of Scripture and the perfection of Christ.

Jesus, as I told this pastor, believed that the story of Jonah was real. In Matthew 12:39–40 Jesus says, “Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth.” If that was all we had, it could be argued that Jesus could be referencing a fantasy story or allegory for the sake of an illustration. But in verse 41, He goes on to say, “The men of Nineveh will rise with this generation and condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah.” Not only did Jesus base His resurrection in the historical account of Jonah, He based His future judgment on a parallel between the response to Jonah and to Himself.

Those who choose to rely on human reason must answer with this pastor, “Well, Jesus was wrong.” However, if Jesus was wrong, He wasn’t perfect and was no longer a perfect sacrifice. He was a sinner, and therefore, His sacrifice on the cross really couldn’t redeem. A sinner can’t bring redemption by dying for another sinner, and if Jesus’s death on the cross can’t redeem us, what can?

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” When we fail to accept the person and majesty of Christ, the dominoes of our faith begin to fall very quickly. He had to be the perfect Son of God to do what He did—to die so that you and I might have eternal life. Being justified by His death, we shall be saved by His life. You must have what He is, the life, to be what He is, and that is righteous in the sight of a holy God.
SOTERIOLOGY: THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

The third irreducible minimum is what I would call “the necessity of the new birth,” and it follows from the other two. Jesus said in John 3:3, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God,” and again in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”

The two cardinal doctrines wrapped in these statements are the inability of the sinner to save oneself and the great theological concept of propitiation.

The path to salvation is not a matter of our intellect or social compassion. Instead, our inability to save ourselves is an issue of our nature. Romans 5:6–8 says, “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” In our state of sinfulness, grace has come to spiritually impotent sinners, inviting us by the power of the Spirit to respond to the gospel.

The doctrine of propitiation states that if we believe, we have eternal life solely because of Christ’s ability to offer Himself as a substitute in our place. We deserve death. He died on our behalf. That brought satisfaction to God.

Our founder, Lewis Sperry Chafer, used to close class when he was teaching on this doctrine by saying, “Gentlemen, God is satisfied.” God is satisfied with what? With the work that His Son did. Jesus satisfied the righteous demands of a holy God to provide salvation for sinners. All of us have sinned and constantly fall short of His glory, but we are justified by faith because of His grace.
Missiology: Reaching the World for Christ

The fourth irreducible minimum is “Missiology,” the doctrine of reaching the world for Christ. In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus says, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Jesus states here that His authority is universal, over the spirit world and the natural world. In this authority, He commands, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.” The implied subject of this command is you. It is personally directed to the disciples of the first century, but because it is in Holy Scripture, it is also personally directed to us.

The commission is personal, but it is also international in scope: to make disciples, to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to disciple them “to observe all that I commanded you.” This is the reason why DTS is involved around the world in 104 countries. It is why we want to translate teaching materials into Mandarin and Spanish, and into Arabic in the next few years as the Lord wills and provides.

The command is transformational in its goal and possible in its fulfillment. As Jesus says, “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Until the Lord comes back or the world is reached, evangelizing and discipling the nations will remain our task.
Bibliology, Christology, Soteriology, and Missiology are the four core tenets of Evangelical faith, because what you believe about Jesus, based on what you believe about the Word of God, will determine the message of the gospel and the mission of your life. If the Bible is not true, it doesn’t matter how you live. If it doesn’t matter how you live, then you don’t really need Jesus. If you don’t really need Jesus, then you don’t need eternal life. If you don’t need eternal life, there is no need to reach out to a lost and dying world.

When we compromise any of these four, we stray onto the dangerous path of withdrawing from orthodox Christianity, and we are on the path to liberalism. We must be alert for signs of compromise in our own lives and discerning as we face the encroaching tide of liberalism washing against the shores of both the Christian and the American culture.

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