

# The Last Word: Second Temple Evangelicalism

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**H**ave you ever overheard, or participated in, a conversation that goes something like this?

**Joe:** "Hey, Jane, we missed you in church yesterday! Where were you? Did you go home this weekend to see your folks?"

**Jane:** "No, I was here, but I went over to Community Fellowship Bible Church to hear Bobby Rayburn preach. He is really into John Piper's stuff and I like Piper and wanted to hear him."

**Joe:** "Oh, cool. Was he good?"

**Jane:** "Yeah. He really goes right along with Piper, so I liked it and he was a really good speaker."

**Joe:** "Next time let me know about it and I'll go with you. I am really getting into some of Ortberg's stuff lately and he's terrific. I also like some of Dallas Willard, too. Larry, who do you like?"

**Larry:** "Well, right now I'm a bit bogged down in N. T. Wright and I like his stuff, but have you read Don Carson? I really like the pastoral edge in what he writes."

**Jane:** "I like Carson pretty much. But, Piper is really strong on grace. I loved the point yesterday about the need for grace before you can even have faith."

**Larry:** "Yes! That is so important. Piper says that, too."

**Joe:** "Ortberg, too."

**Jane:** "Larry, whose church do you go to?"

**Larry:** "Oh, I grew up in a church my dad helped start, and I still go there. It's huge now. It's just called God's House, but you've heard of the pastor, Justin Fide."

**Joe and Jane together:** "Oh, yeah!"

**Joe:** "I heard a tape of his once. Really solid. I didn't know you went to his church."

**Larry:** "Yeah. My dad was one of the people that broke away from another church to help him start the church. And now it's huge."

**Jane:** "Joe and I go to Alvin Brown's church. He's really good, too. I figure as long as the pastor preaches the cross and the forgiveness of sin, it's good."

**Larry:** "I agree. Have you guys heard this new song by Michael W. Smith? It's got a line that goes, 'I am crucified with Christ, yet I live, yet I live.' Awesome idea, huh?"

Even if you substitute Max Lucado, Rick Warren and C. S. Lewis for Piper, Wright and Carson, conversations like this are fairly common among evangelicals. I've begun to think that this conversation is similar to those Jesus may have heard in the first century. Contemporary evangelicalism may have more in common with Second Temple Judaism than we would like to admit.

Jews in the first century had a tendency to identify with a favourite rabbi or rabbinical school. I am of Hillel! I am of Shammai! This, of course carried over into the early church. Paul's mocking comment in 1 Corinthians makes the point. I am of Apollos! I am of Cephas! Twenty centuries later, believers are strongly identifying with certain teachers and the way they think and write. Jesus faced the deep root of this pattern when the Jews defended their status as God's people by saying, 'We are sons of Abraham!' Paul noted that this led to divisions in the church and was a mark of spiritual pride. In the same way it is not unusual for Christians today to identify their faith by favourite authors or speakers or whose church they attend. Like the Corinthians, Christians would certainly affirm, 'I am of Christ', but this

was and is simply a prideful nod to orthodoxy. This often-divisive habit is closely paralleled to another first and twenty-first century problem.

Like Second Temple Judaism, the evangelical church has strong Talmudic tendencies. Scholars, clergy and laity read commentaries, books, monographs, and essays and quote those who write them more than the Scripture itself. We may chuckle when a Christian like Larry thinks Michael W. Smith wrote Galatians 2:19–20, but too many believers actually think the formulation of the *idea* itself is new as well! Communities of faith too often dismiss the creeds, find no use for Patristic theology, and substitute a Philip Yancey film series for the Bible Jesus really did know. Contemporary evangelicals too often settle for theology that is grounded in song lyrics, favourite quotes and Scripture sound-bites only fit for T-shirts, bracelets and wall-hangings. The pulpit personality, the messenger, becomes more important than the message. And Joe and Jane end up going to Alvin Brown's church instead of the Church of Jesus Christ and never see the implications of how this shift in language becomes a part of their identity. Evangelical academics can be guilty of the same tendencies even if the people we quote use polysyllabic words and have impressive footnotes.

Finally, Second Temple Judaism got embroiled in these divisive detours because the major threat to their spiritual lives, sin, was already taken care of through the sacrificial system. Believers could bifurcate over penultimate preferences and think little of it because there was a system in place for taking care of the sin problem. Jewish confidence in the sacrificial system was well grounded in God's word, and they believed it. Sin was covered. Temple sacrifice was the John 3:16 of the first century. Believing God's word, first century Jews essentially said, 'Been there, done that', and rested in their own sense of righteousness. Contemporary evangelicals sometimes speak of the cross of Jesus with similar cause-and-effect confidence. The cross as reduced to a 'sacrificial system' that takes care of sin contributes to the dualistic wedge between salvation and sanctification that is increasingly manifest in evangelical faith and life. Jesus described the theologically correct and ethically bankrupt of his day as 'white-washed tombs'.

First century Pharisees boasted of their genealogical link to Abraham, identification with a favourite rabbinical school and were confident their sins had been dealt with. They were also blind to the Messiah in their midst and deaf to his rebuke.

The more understanding I have of Second Temple Judaism, the better I see some parallel dynamics in contemporary evangelicalism. My eschatology may be a bit less radically realized, but Wright's contextualizing

of the first century hits close to home, twenty centuries later. Evangelicals today are proud of our links to particular theological ancestors (whether John Calvin or John Stott). Too many of us are students of sound-bite schools we love to quote, from song lyrics to best-selling marquee conference speakers. And a hallmark of evangelicalism is our confidence that our sin problem has been dealt with. But, how clearly do we see our Messiah and can we hear the New Testament Jesus speak? Will we repent if we hear him call us white-washed tombs?